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## **Doctorate in Professional Studies**

**Project Title:** ‘The Involvement of Young People Leaving Care in Social Work Education and Practice’

Candidate Name: Lucille Allain

Candidate Number: M00127084

2016

# Contents

<b>Abstract</b>	<b>Pages 5-6</b>
<b>Chapter 1- Introduction</b>	<b>Pages 7-28</b>
<b>Chapter 2- Literature Review</b>	<b>Pages 30-90</b>
Section i: Legislative and Policy Context:	Pages 31-46
Section ii: Transitions, Social Capital and Care Leavers:	Pages 47-72
Section iii: Social work education, the curriculum:	Pages 73-91
<b>Chapter 3- Methodology and Research Methods</b>	<b>Pages 92-119</b>
<b>Chapter 4- Project Activity and data collection</b>	<b>Pages 120 -124</b>
<b>Chapter 5- Project Findings and Discussion of Findings</b>	<b>Pages 125-171</b>
<b>Chapter 6- Reflexive account</b>	<b>Pages 172-176</b>
<b>Chapter 7- Conclusion and implications for practice, policy and further research:</b>	<b>Pages 177-180</b>

## **Appendices**

Appendix 1- data from the questionnaires

## **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to Professor Paul Gibbs for his support, challenge and rigour and for helping me to think beyond the obvious. Huge thanks also to Dr. Linda Bell for her patience and for

sharing her wisdom about what it means to undertake social research. You have stayed with me every step of the way, thank you for your kindness and for never giving up on me.

Thank you to the young people who shared their stories with me, the students and social workers, we all learnt something very important.

Thank you to my family: Howard, Hannah and Phoebe

## **Abstract**

This work-based doctorate focuses on care leavers' experiences of transitions to independent living. An interpretative research methodology was used alongside a model of participatory action research. The research design and epistemology were informed by social work practice issues and by my interest in phenomenological, subjectivist approaches to research.

The doctoral project was undertaken across two organisations; one a local authority child and family social work service and the other a university which delivers social work education. The doctoral study details the policy and legislative context for young people who are care leavers in England and also includes data on statistical trends in England for looked after children and care leavers.

The research is underpinned by social work practice literature and by professional guiding frameworks. This includes drawing on theoretical ideas relevant to understanding the position of care leavers and their journeys to adulthood; including, psycho-social theory in relation to transitions and liminality. Links are made to social work research focused on the socio-economic, health, well-being and identity needs of care leavers. The main underpinning theoretical framework; Bourdieu's theory of social capital- is used as an analytic device to theorise and explore the unique experiences of care leavers. Pedagogic literature is also examined in relation to the role of service user participation in social work education and is linked to Foucauldian critical theory regarding issues of power and identity categorisations and the notion of being a "service user". Connections are made to transformational learning and how through adult learning, new social networks can be created which enhance social capital paving the way for new opportunities.

The research project had four stages in relation to project activity and data gathering. The first stage was a questionnaire to all the young people from the local authority receiving a leaving care service. The second stage involved two focus groups with a self-selecting sample of young people who had completed a questionnaire. The third stage of the project involved some care leavers who had taken part in the focus groups attending 'Total Respect'

training (for trainers). Following this, and in preparation for the fourth stage, I worked with the young people to plan and deliver training to social work students, social workers and managers about care leavers' views of social work practice and services. The fourth stage involved semi-structured interviews with a sample of social workers, students and the young people.

The findings showed these young people are resilient and self-reliant but need access to the right support at the right time. They wanted to be listened to, allowed to make mistakes and have the opportunity to try again to achieve independent living. Through using the vehicle of training workshops, the young people communicated their often challenging experiences of transitions to adulthood. Findings showed that using this approach in social work education and in local authorities can influence positive changes to individual and organisational social work practice. Following the training it was identified that everyone learnt something new: social workers, students and the young people, and that the power of direct testimony from the young people created a transformative learning experience for students and social workers.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

In recent years a considerable body of research literature and practice guidance has emerged which has focused on: 'attempts to directly uncover the experiences, views and perspectives of young people in care' (Holland, 2009, p226). Practice guidance has then built on the findings from research evidence and sought to act on what young people have said through participatory activities, mentoring and advocacy (Munro, 2001; Ward, Skuse and Munro 2005; Thomas, 2005; Oliver and Dalrymple, 2008). Although there has been a great deal of activity in local and voluntary sector organisations to facilitate the inclusion and participation of young people who are or have been 'looked after' or 'in care', many organisations have struggled to move 'from principled support for children's participation to embedding that commitment in everyday practice' (Brady, 2007, p31). The aim of this project was to design and implement a work-based doctoral project which addressed the issues identified by Brady (2007) that hearing the voices of young people should be integral to everyday practice in social work. As a social worker and academic with many years' experience of working with children in care and care leavers, I am committed to inclusive and participatory work with young people. My project design was built around facilitating the involvement of young people so that their views could be heard and acted upon.

This project aimed to effect changes in organisational and professional practice through involving care leavers in delivering training workshops to social work students and social workers about how to communicate and work with young people who have been in care and now receive leaving care services. The policy and legislative context referred to throughout relates to social work practice in England.

The project was developed and delivered across two organisations (a university social work department and a neighbouring local authority's social work service for children and



families). The workshops led by young care leavers were delivered to social work students at a university and qualified social workers from an English local authority's children's services department. A key aim and desired outcome was to support care leavers to share their experiences of the care system with students and professionals in order to facilitate and improve social work practice. Planning and implementing the project involved four stages. The first was gathering data through questionnaires from care leavers from the local authority on their experiences of social work services. This then informed the second stage which was focus groups with a sample of young people recruited from the completion of the survey questionnaires. The third stage was facilitation with the care leavers so that they could develop and deliver workshops to social workers and students from the two organisations. The fourth and final stage was semi-structured interviews following the training workshops with the young people plus a sample of social work students and social workers who had attended the training. It is a requirement that this work-based doctorate refers to both the Project aims which are linked to the module learning outcomes (DPS 5260) and also the research questions which are listed below.

**Project aims:**

- To deepen social workers' and social work students' understandings of the needs of young people leaving care;
- To support young people who had been in care (and were receiving a service from the local authority's leaving care team) to develop and deliver training and teaching workshops to qualified social workers and social work students;
- To improve social work education and practice.

**Overarching Research Aims**

- To explore how young people who have been through the care system can contribute to teaching social work students and qualified social workers through sharing their own experiences.
- To contribute to the debate about critically reflective social work practice with young people leaving care.
- To explore how students and social workers learn about social work practice.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the views of young care leavers about the services they receive as part of the Children (Leaving Care Act) 2000?
2. How can the involvement of care leavers in delivering training, influence social workers' and students' practice?
3. What were the main messages identified by the young people, social workers and students following attendance at training workshops delivered by young care leavers?
4. How can involvement in delivering this training influence care leavers' social and economic capital?

I constructed and delivered a work based doctoral project in order to meet these aims and in doing so achieved the following outcomes:

- Young care leavers developed and delivered training workshops in a local authority social work children and families service and in a university social work department;
- The young care leavers co-authored a book chapter for a book I edited and contributed to. The book is: *'Advanced Social Work with Children and Families, Post-Qualifying Social Work Practice'*, Cocker, C and Allain, L (2011) and the chapter is Allain, L

and Cocker, C, with Hinds, O, Naluwaga, E and Babondock, A (2011) '*What's important for looked after children? The views of young people leaving care*';

- The young people gave a presentation about their experiences at a local authority children's services conference which influenced change in the local authority;
- The training workshops at the university and in the local authority received very positive feedback from course participants;
- The university social work department has embedded the delivery of teaching workshops from young care leavers into its curricula.

It is mandatory that service users are involved in social work programmes, this is in relation to delivering teaching; recruiting students and in the development of the curricula (DH, 2002; Levin, 2004; The College of Social Work (undated curriculum guides). Reforms to social work education led by, The College of Social Work (TCSW) continued to include this requirement and became an important part of The College of Social Work's endorsement criteria for universities delivering social work education programmes. The social work profession values the unique contribution that service users and carers make to the delivery of social work education. Through their experiences of using social work services; service users and carers are able to bring this valued perspective and their knowledge into the classroom. Overall, the aim is that their voices are heard. Littlechild (2012) refers to research by Chase (2010) who interviewed asylum seeking young people. It was argued that in order to understand how best to deliver a service, which includes an awareness of cultural needs, the profession must first of all find a way to draw upon 'service user narratives' (p65). At the university which was the focus of this study, service users had a tradition of contributing to many aspects of the social work stakeholder group and were involved in teaching and admissions (Allain, et al 2006). However, overall the groups of service users who have been

most involved in social work education have less frequently included children in care or young people receiving a service from leaving care teams. This has largely been due to concerns about ethical practice, difficulties in engaging young people and finding agreement about what approach should be taken. Similar issues in relation to the complexities of involving young people in service planning and in training exist in local authority social work departments. This can also be found in the literature focused on research strategies and methodological issues involving young people in care in research (Thomas and O’Kane, 2000; Ward and Henderson, 2003). The differing approaches used in service user involvement in social work may include a consumerist model or a rights-based model. The former focuses on choice and control and is central to current policy in adult social care in relation to personalisation which emerged from ‘*Independence, Well-being and Choice*’ (DH 2005) and was laid out in ‘*Putting People First*’ (DH 2007). Since then this has been developed further with the enactment of the Care Act 2015. The latter mentioned focuses on a rights-based model which advocates an empowerment approach to ensure service users’ voices are heard (Postle and Beresford, 2007).

The catalyst for undertaking this doctoral research project first came from my interest in a work project I was asked to lead and deliver in my capacity as a joint appointment in the local authority social work, child and family service which became one of the sites for this research. As a social worker with many years’ experience with children in care, foster carers, birth parents and adopters, I had a strong interest in undertaking this research. At the point of beginning my doctoral study (in 2006) I had limited experience of undertaking research so my method was guided by my interest and commitment in working in partnership with young people and their families. This led me to focus on taking a participatory action research approach underpinned by phenomenological theory. My epistemological and ontological

position was tentatively formed and grew and developed over the nine years it took me to complete my doctoral study.

The work project I was asked to develop was in relation to building links with young people from the leaving care service. The aim was to enable them to feedback their experiences to managers about the care they had received and then to facilitate training for staff so that they could enhance their skills in how to communicate with and support young people through the leaving care process. At this point, I held a joint appointment post where for one half of the week I worked in a local authority social work department and for the rest of the week I was a social work academic. I became interested in undertaking a Professional Doctorate due to my professional background and the nature of my role. I wanted to undertake research linked to the organisations I was part of and connect this with the tasks of my joint role; this felt like a ‘good fit’ with my career pathway. The challenges I experienced being an insider-researcher and what I learnt from this are discussed in Chapter three, ‘methodology and methods’ and in Chapter six – ‘reflexive account of personal learning and professional journey’.

In choosing to undertake a work-based doctorate I had become aware how, ‘there is a curriculum in the workplace as well as on campus’ (Portwood, 2000, p10). I was also interested in the intellectual traditions underpinning work-based learning and the epistemological challenges of undertaking a doctorate where the focus is on ‘knowledge that is generated in a context of application and interdisciplinarity’ (Costley, 2000, p.23). The vision statement from the ‘*Subject Handbook: Doctorate in Professional Studies*’ (2002) assisted me in developing my doctoral research project, including the overarching aims, research questions and desired project impacts. It states that the aim is to: ‘recognise and link

the critical thinking of academia with real -world issues confronting communities and professional areas and to help candidates play a unique role in implementing change, developing innovative approaches and creating sustainable solutions to complex issues' (p.6). The challenges I encountered and the specific organisational contexts are discussed in more detail in Chapter six.

Listening to children in care and seeking their views is a key aspect of government policy and is central to the Children Act 1989. Government policy documents in England have continued to emphasise the importance of involving looked after children and young people in planning and developing services. This was part of the Quality Protects initiative (DOH, 1998); Every Child Matters (DfES, 2003) and in the *Green Paper, Care Matters: Transforming the lives of children and young people in care* (DfES, 2006) followed by the '*White Paper, Care Matters: Time for Change*' (DfES, 2007) which resulted in the enactment of legislation, the Children and Young Persons Act 2008. The publication of: '*Volume 3: Planning Transition to Adulthood for Care Leavers*, (Department of Education, 2010b) identified that in order for local authorities to be judged as 'outstanding', they need to evidence that they have developed a culture of listening to children in care and care leavers and have robust strategies for supporting care leavers with the transition to adulthood.

My main aim was to develop a work-based project focused on exploring how young people who had been in care could be involved in teaching social workers and social work students; what messages they wanted to convey and how the information they communicated would be used by the students and social workers. As well as exploring the experiences of young people in relation to the role of the local authority, my aim was also focused on involving young people who had experience of care in the development of the social work academic

curriculum so that they could deliver workshops to students. Therefore, the evidence of achievement referred to as central to the assessment of this project module focuses on how I achieved new developments in practice across two organisations and created new courses in the local authority and introduced change to some aspects of social work teaching. This involved a process of learning in practice and is discussed by Wenger (1998) as a process of 'evolving forms of mutual engagement, discovering how to engage, what helps and what hinders, developing mutual relationships, defining identities and who is who' (p95).

In order to fulfil the doctoral project aims a multi-methods approach was used to gather data. A participative action research approach was used to ensure that the young people were directly involved in designing, developing and delivering the training to students and social workers. This research strategy is described by Kemmis and McTaggart (2003) as one where there is emphasis on the 'interdependence of the activities of university academics and educators' (p.336). The aim was to give attention to whether involving young care leavers directly in teaching social work could facilitate and deepen social workers' and students' understanding of the needs of children and young people in care and leaving care and create more holistic ways of working. Working with the young people required a lengthy and intensive commitment as it was important to build trusting relationships and part of that meant hearing first of all about their experiences of social work services. This enabled me to understand from their perspective, what would be most useful for the social work students and social workers who attended the workshops and training.

The issue of research positionality and how I dealt with and reflected on where I sit in relation to my own research is discussed in greater depth in chapter three and is also picked up again in chapter six where I discuss my professional and learning journey. It is also

mentioned here as my positionality influenced my research focus, epistemology and methodology. Rose (1997) argues that researchers should examine their own positionality reflexively. In undertaking this doctoral project this was complex, as I held multiple positionalities as a doctoral student, a social worker and an academic. I considered very carefully what approach would best facilitate the involvement of the young people, who can be perceived as a marginalised group. I sought to try and balance my role between having a professional background as a social worker, being a research doctoral student and an employee. I was conscious of my status as an 'insider researcher' and was vigilant about the risks of ending up 'going native' and losing my research focus. I opted to use a rights based, participatory approach integrating a strengths and resilience model with time made to build trust and respect with the young people.

I reflected on the importance of ensuring my methodological approach gave the young people control over the research process and the project overall, from my experience of working with young people I know this was very important. Young people who have grown up in care often report feeling ignored and marginalised in terms of decision-making so this became an important consideration which I discussed with them throughout the life of the project. Using a participatory model when undertaking research with children is recommended by Thomas and O'Kane (1998) and although my sample group were older young people there was relevance for my study. I was aware of the particular vulnerabilities of this group and how government data giving the reasons why children and young people enter the care system shows that the majority, - 62% in 2014 - receive a service due to concerns about abuse and neglect. In England, there has been an annual increase in the numbers of children entering the care system since 2010 but the reasons for children and young people



receiving a service have remained largely constant (DfE, 2014). This then impacts on the social, emotional and educational development of young people.

Research by Meltzer et al (2003) found greater levels of mental health disorders in the looked after children population with almost half of all looked after children being in need of mental health services. They also found that this group of young people required additional support in their education and with making friendships which is so important in building self-esteem and a sense of belonging and acceptance. These linked variables emphasise how emotional and behavioural difficulties are inseparable from numerous other aspects of life and can have a significant impact on the progress a young person makes once they enter care. In addition, working with adolescents and older young people can be seen as a challenge for professionals due to concerns about aggression, disengagement and disturbed behaviour (Briggs, 2009). Alongside this, consultations with young people from policy initiatives reveals that young people in care often feel misunderstood and want their social workers to listen to them and be genuine, honest and reliable (DfES, 2007). The social work education curriculum at my university addresses these issues through teaching students about theories of human development and the impact of abuse and harm for children; but also incorporates the strengths perspective and how the resilience of young people who have experienced care can be developed.

In order to support the young people and to develop my doctoral project I drew on theories of adult learning, in particular, transformative learning theory (Taylor, 2007). This approach was selected as it attends to 'the emotional and affective dimensions of transformation and recognition of the centrality of relationships in the transformative learning process' (Sands and Tennant, 2010, p.99). As the research findings from my doctoral project show, this

approach is ‘found to be effective at capturing the meaning making process of adult learners, particularly the learning process of paradigmatic shifts’ (Taylor, 2007, p. 174). In addition, Lange (2004) describes how action research has ‘a natural affinity with transformative learning, as it allows the study of how understanding develops in the midst of bringing about change’ (pp 123-124). It can mean that change becomes possible through a transformative learning experience and in this doctoral project that meant shifting perspectives of social work students and social workers in relation to their practice. This was facilitated by the young care leavers who delivered the training using an approach combining story-telling, scenarios and dialogue.

Social work practice and social work education in England is informed by standards of Conduct and Ethics from the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC 2015). Overall, the profession emerged from a tradition of dedication to social justice; advocacy and citizenship plus a commitment to inclusion and giving opportunities for marginalised groups to have a voice in making changes to services and society more broadly. Young people who have experienced care are a vulnerable group and engaging them in research can be challenging as they have a number of other key priority issues to grapple with. These include being over-represented in crime statistics and in the numbers of people in prisons: ‘23% of the adult prison population has been in care and almost 40% of prisoners under 21 were in care as children (only 2% of the general population spend time in prison)’ (Who Cares Trust, 2014). In addition, they experience lower educational attainment compared to their peers (DfE 2014) and are at ‘greater risk of early pregnancy and social disadvantage than other groups’ (SCIE, 2004). They are also at risk of experiencing unstable housing and in securing employment (Broad, 2005; Dixon et al, 2004; Wade and Dixon 2006). The government focus has been on seeking to find meaningful ways of involving young people from care although the state has itself been criticised as being a poor parent for looked after children (Bullock et al, 2006;

Garrett, 1999). In order to tackle some of these issues, the idea of ‘Corporate Parenting’ was introduced. This in essence means that local authority staff are collectively the ‘Corporate Parents’ for looked after children (DCSF, 2009). In ‘Care Matters: Time for Change:’ 2007, (DfES) the details regarding the purpose and role of corporate parents is laid out.

*A good corporate parent must offer everything that a good parent would, including stability. It must address both the difficulties which children in care experience and the challenges of parenting within a complex system of different services. Equally, it is important that children have a chance to shape and influence the parenting they receive.*  
(Brammer, 2010, p.289)

My interest was in exploring what theoretical and practice knowledge social workers and social work students drew on in seeking to directly communicate with young people who had been looked after and were care leavers. I was curious about what sort of messages they had received from their professional training and from the academic literature about what approach they should take. I was also interested in what the young people’s own experiences of care had been and what had helped them make the journey through the process of leaving care and independence. Part of my doctoral project involved examining whether the rhetoric of policies and procedures were realised in social work practice realities. I hypothesised that social work practice was often constrained by a deficit model in relation to the strengths, capabilities and resilience of young people who had experienced care and that their participation in being involved in making changes to practice was challenging to decision-makers and required negotiation. In my research findings a dichotomy is revealed in relation to what policy says should happen and the actualities of practice.

The contribution of service users and carers is a mandatory part of social work education and the development of the curriculum across all universities where social work education is

taught. Service users' contributions are viewed as different but equal to that of other stakeholders and service users have been described in some of the literature as 'experts by experience' (Scourfield, 2010). Although this term has been criticised as being misleading, it is still widely used in social welfare discourses as it confers respect for the expertise of people who are or have used social work services. However, the involvement of young people who had been in care at the university I work at was less developed. One of the reasons for this are the challenges of time and resources as making these contacts involves committed outreach work and networking in local authorities as young people who have experience of care are seldom contactable through more mainstream groups. Due to my joint-appointment role across the university and local authority I was able to build contacts with key people and negotiate access to care leavers who became part of this project. In summary, my aim was to undertake a work-based research project which would inform teaching, learning and social work practice across two organisations drawing on the experiences of young people who had experienced care. The evidence in relation to whether and to what extent the stated aims and outcomes have been met is discussed and analysed in Chapters five, six and seven.

### **Objectives and Organisational Context**

The professional context for undertaking this Doctorate is that I am a qualified social worker with the role of Associate Professor and Director of Programmes for Social Work at an English university. In March 2012, I moved to the post of Associate Dean at another university and in October 2013 I returned to the first university to resume the role of Associate Professor and Director of Programmes, Social Work. My specialist area is in child and family social work and I stay linked with practice through being vice-chair of a local

authority fostering and adoption panel. I also have a teaching qualification specifically for teaching in higher education.

I began my Doctorate in 2006 when I held a joint post between a local authority, children services department and a university (Head of Practice Learning in the local authority and Principal Lecturer, Social Work at the university). I chose to study for a Professional Doctorate as it was highly relevant to my role working across two organisations responsible for social work education. Although I changed my job role in 2007 and became a full-time social work lecturer I was able to demonstrate to the Doctoral Approval Panel in January 2008 how my doctoral studies continued to meet the required conditions. The aim was to produce outcomes that are of value to my profession and employer. The project also delivered outcomes of value for my previous employer; this has been achieved through the close strategic and professional links I have maintained. The common theme across both organisations in relation to my doctoral project is social work practice and education.

This section outlines the sequence of activities and is followed by a timeline. Initially, a questionnaire to all young people in the local authority's leaving care service was distributed. This resulted in the return of fifty completed survey questionnaires from a mail out to two hundred and forty young people (data gathered, July 2007). This questionnaire focused on the young peoples' experience of services. The second stage of the project involved two focus groups with young people from the leaving care service where questions asked built on some of the issues that had emerged from the quantitative data (data gathered, June 2008). The aim was to capture the views of a sample of young people so that issues emerging from the data in the survey questionnaires could be explored in greater depth; eleven young people were interviewed in two separate focus groups.

The third stage of the project involved co-training with the same group of young people on a programme called 'Total Respect Training'. This programme focuses on empowering young people to enable them to train and be involved in work with professionals: the aim is to create greater understanding between young care leavers, who have experienced social work services, and professionals who deliver social work services (July 2008). The fourth and final stage of the project was gathering data through semi-structured interviews with three care leavers who had delivered the training, three students who had taken part in a workshop delivered by the young people at university and four social workers who had taken part in training delivered in the local authority (data gathered, May/June 2009). The research project evaluates the experience of the training for both the young people and for the social workers and students. The research project meets the requirements of the stakeholders as it aims to improve social work practice and education for an important local authority partner. In addition, for my employer, it meets key outcomes in terms of the need to show evidence of involving service users in professional social work programmes.

### **Timeline**

1. Survey questionnaires to all care leavers from the local authority (July 2007)
2. Two focus groups with young people from the leaving care service (June 2008)
3. 'Total Respect Training' - train the trainer course which I attended alongside the young people who had expressed an interest in the next stage of the project which was delivering training to social workers and students (July 2008)
4. Planning the training sessions with a group of young people who had completed 'Total Respect Training' (August – November 2008)
5. Delivery of training sessions (November 2008 – April 2009)

6. Semi-structured interviews (May-June 2009)
7. Data analysis and writing up (2009-2011)
8. Change of role to another university (March 2012)
9. Returned to role in first university (October 2013)
10. Submitted completed doctorate (October 2015)
11. Viva voce- (January 2016)

### **Research questions**

Earlier in this chapter I referred to some of the tensions and challenges in relation to the involvement of young people who are service users in social work practice and education as there can be a disconnect between policy requirements and the realities of practice. This has been identified in previous research; for example in Kirby, et al (2003) where a summary of research findings from twenty-nine organisations highlighted the importance of organisational commitment to embedding the participation activity of young people in existing structures. Research from Gunn (2008) which was conducted across three organisations and used data from twenty-four semi structured interviews with young people, practitioners, managers and local politicians also emphasises the importance of organisational culture and issues of power. Although this and other research will be analysed as part of the literature review these issues are being identified here as thinking about them and experiencing some of the challenges informed the project aims and research questions.

This research project is underpinned by a concern that social work practice is not always informed by the lived experiences of young people who have been the recipients of care

services. Also, that their involvement in participation and training initiatives has at times been tokenistic, limited and lacking in consideration about the needs of the young people themselves. It can be the case that some young people value ongoing support and involvement whereas others only want to be involved in participation projects for a short-time period and then want to shed the identity or 'label' of being a care leaver. This doctoral project aims to explain and explore these issues and their implications for ongoing work in university social work departments and in local authority child and family social work teams. The methodology used in this study is an interpretive, qualitative approach; although quantitative data was gathered in stage one to give biographical information. Overall, the study is underpinned by participatory action research. Multi-methods were used to gather data and included: self-completion survey questionnaires; focus groups and semi-structured interviews.

To assist in identifying key issues for the first research question I undertook a survey questionnaire of all young people from one English local authority's leaving care team. I then conducted two focus groups with five and six young people in each group to build on the biographical data I had received from the self-completion survey questionnaires. The research participants for the focus groups were a self-selecting sample of young people who had completed a questionnaire. Undertaking individual semi-structured interviews with a sample of social workers and social work students who attended the training delivered by the young people informed answering research questions two and three. In relation to exploring and responding to research question four, the completion of semi-structured interviews with the young people was key as well as undertaking project activities.



Project activities included the ‘Total Respect Training’ and young people presenting to a staff conference in the local authority. The aim was to ascertain from students and social workers what meanings they attributed to the key messages they had received and what the likely impact would be on their social work practice and ways of thinking about and responding to the needs of young people in care and leaving care. I also wanted to examine the young people’s views about their experiences of delivering the training workshops, what messages they had received and what they understood by them. Being part of this action research project resulted in the young people making a film for teaching; facilitated their involvement in writing a book chapter as co-authors and has meant they have continued to be involved in university activities which have had a positive link with their education and employment opportunities.

### **Terminology Used**

In this section I have provided an explanation of the terminology used in this doctoral project which is specific to my professional background as a social worker. The use of the term ‘service user’ in relation to social work describes those who have experience of receiving social work services. In this case, former looked after children who are now care leavers. When ‘service user’ it is used in conjunction with the term ‘carer’ this includes anyone who cares for someone who receives social work services. Prior to the use of the word ‘service user’ social workers described those they worked with as ‘clients’. There was a change in the terminology from ‘client’ to ‘service user’ in the 1990s driven by disability rights groups who wanted a more inclusive term and the use of ‘service user’ represented shifting political ideologies about choice, empowerment and inclusion. These issues are explored by MacLaughlin (2009) who critically examines why different terms have been used to describe

service users and carers including; client', 'consumer' or 'expert by experience'. He explores the relevance of the debates about these terms and makes links to issues of power between service users and social workers. He argues that the term 'service user', although meant to be more equal, still remains problematic as it conveys the idea of mutuality and agreement between professionals and 'service users'. Whereas in reality there is not always choice about what services are used, by whom and at what point. For many 'service users' they do not choose to use services provided by social work but receive social work involvement due to statutory duties and requirements. This may be in relation to child protection, adult safeguarding, mental health intervention, work with young offenders and children who are looked after. Whilst recognising the debates about the term 'service user', as it is used widely in the academic literature and in social work practice, it will be used throughout this doctoral project.

The terms 'participation' and 'service user involvement' are often used interchangeably in the social work literature. In relation to young people, participation can be defined as listening and taking action on what they say in terms of delivering services. It means that there should be: 'two-way active involvement in public decision-making. It involves significant levels of responsibility, influence in decision-making and some level of power-sharing with adults' (Partridge, 2005).

The term 'looked after child' refers to all children 'who are accommodated by the local authority; in a residential or foster placement, placed for adoption and all children who are the subject of a care order' (Brammer, 2010, p. 290). 'Looked after children' or children 'in care'? As stated by Johns (2005, p48) using the term 'in care' is not legally correct, although many looked after children use this term and it is used by the Government in the White Paper,

Care Matters: Time for Change (DfES, 2007). I will use both terms interchangeably in this doctoral project with usage dependent on the context of the discussion.

Young people leaving care are former looked after children who are sixteen years old and over and receive a service from a specialist local authority leaving care team. Some young care leavers are eligible for support services until they are 25 years old and can seek support from children's services regarding education plans. Leaving care teams are staffed by social workers and support workers and work in partnership with a range of other agencies to offer on-going support in the areas of housing, education, employment, independent living skills and emotional support. Leaving care may represent the final journey for young people who have experienced care but it is also the start of a new journey for young people into adulthood.

As this was a work based doctorate seeking to engage with young people from a socially excluded group, there were methodological problems in trying to develop a strategy which met organisational and 'work' requirements; was based on participatory action research and yet also answered the central research questions. Some of the issues I encountered and the rationale for my decisions regarding research methodology and methods are discussed further in Chapter 3 with further elaboration in Chapter 4 about the organisational context and project activity.

### **Structure of the project report**

This doctoral project is presented in the form of a single document that demonstrates outcomes and achievements and is integrated with a critical commentary regarding the strengths and limitations of the project and the methodological and organisational challenges which were encountered. The doctoral project report is structured around seven chapters and stands on three pillars: young people leaving care and transitions; work-based learning; and the involvement of care leavers in delivering education and training to professionals; often described as participation. The main theoretical framework used to analyse and explore both the experiences of young care leavers and the outcomes for them arising from being involved in the delivery of training to social workers are transitions in adolescence with links to Bourdieu's theory of social capital. His theoretical ideas are integral to the whole research project. He defined social capital as assets and attributes individuals could gain and stated that: **'social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition'** (Bourdieu 1984: 249). In addition, theoretical ideas from transformative learning theory (Taylor, 2007) are used to explore how the social workers and students experienced this different approach to learning delivered by 'non-professionals' who were temporarily placed in a new power relationship with those deemed to be the professionals. The concepts of transitions and liminality are also discussed as part of the literature review as they provide important theoretical underpinnings for understanding the position of care leavers within the discourse about the challenges and opportunities for young people journeying through adolescence and young adulthood (Briggs, 2008).

This introductory chapter provides an overview of the focus of the research project and the professional and practice context for the study. Chapter two is the literature review and is divided into three sections. The chapter begins with Section i: the English legislative and

policy context in relation to care leavers. Section ii of the literature review examines the concepts of transitions and liminality and how they relate to young care leavers' experiences of accommodation, health, education and employment plus social relationships. This section also involves an analysis of Bourdieu's theoretical ideas about social capital and how they can be linked to the transitions young care leavers' experience. The third section explores the literature in relation to service user involvement in social work, social work education and the development of the curricula with links made to relevant policy plus transformative learning theory. Chapter three describes the research methodology, research methods and appraises the overall research strategy. This chapter also explains the ethical considerations which were encountered and why certain data was gathered; from whom, at what point and what approach was taken to analysing the findings. Chapter four provides details about the project activities, where they happened and with whom. Chapter five presents the findings of the research project and also discusses the findings. Chapter six presents a reflexive account of my personal learning and professional journey and Chapter seven presents the conclusion and recommendations for practice.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This literature review has three sections and begins with the legislative and policy context for care leavers in England. The second section of the literature review explores theories of transitions and liminality with the main focus on Bourdieu and the theory of social capital. The third section of the literature review explores pedagogical literature connected to social work education, transformational learning and Foucauldian ideas about 'clienthood' and power.

### **Approach to Literature Search**

A literature search was conducted to identify and summarise the research literature and knowledge plus relevant theoretical frameworks focused on the experiences and circumstances of care leavers in the UK. The literature review aims to build on and draw on the research and consultations already published in relation to care leavers, social work practice and social work education. Searches were undertaken using key words including: care leavers and housing, health, education, employment, well-being and identity. In addition, for this chapter, the literature search included liminality and transitions linked to young people in care or leaving care and to Bourdieu and social capital. For the other section of the literature review, presented and examined in Chapter Four, the search for literature focused on social work education and the curriculum, transformational learning and service user involvement and young people.

Social work and social policy research databases were searched including Social Care Online, ISI Web of Knowledge, PsychINFO and SCIE. Once the searches were completed I identified the most relevant articles and publications for each of the key areas and grouped them together to create order and coherence.

## **Section i: Legislative and Policy Context: Care Leavers in England**

It is argued by James and James (2004) that the law is one of the key mechanisms which govern the 'cultural politics of childhood' (p.7). They describe the 'cultural politics of childhood' as a concept which includes, 'the social status to which children are assigned, as well as the influences children themselves might have over their position as children during childhood in any society' (James and James, 2004, p6). This therefore relates to how societal structures shape childhood (and adolescence) and how children as active agents, shape and influence society's views and actions in relation to them. It is also recognised that the phase of '*adolescence*' is in itself a 'social construct- created within a particular culture' (Sudbery, 2010, p.104). The law is also an important vehicle for highlighting what the thinking or '*zeitgeist*' was at any one particular moment in time. The legislative frameworks in relation to children are no exception in demonstrating this, which is why the legislative and policy narrative relating to care leavers is presented first in this chapter.

Public policy and legislation in relation to children and young people has increasingly been shaped by compelling arguments about children's rights accompanied by recognition of their individual agency. These principles are acknowledged as fundamental to shaping children's experiences of childhood and adolescence (Prout, 2005). Linked to this and instrumental to the changes made in public policy regarding children in care and care leavers was the uncovering of the widespread institutional abuse of looked after children in residential children's homes which came to light in the 1980s and early 1990s (Cocker and Allain, 2013). Two key reports were produced written by Sir William Utting and published by the Government: '*Children in the Public Care* (Utting 1991) and *People Like Us* (Utting 1997). This was followed by the report of an inquiry chaired by Waterhouse; *Lost in Care*

(Waterhouse 2000). These reports 'provide an authoritative and powerful testimony to the extent and impact of abuse in the care system' (Frost and Parton, 2009, p97). The reports revealed how many children were placed in closed institutions where the prevailing orthodoxy was that adults know best and children had minimal rights to speak out and have their views listened to. Following these abuse scandals, the term, 'listening to children' became an essential part of the discourse in relation to social work practice with looked after children and care leavers. All of these issues have led to changing attitudes towards childhood and the rights of children and young people. This has in turn impacted on the development of policies focused on young people in care and care leavers. This section provides a critical review of these policies and the legislative framework which is relevant to the subject area.

### Statistical Data

Children and young people become 'looked after' mostly due to abuse or neglect and many looked after children come from families where there have been parenting difficulties over a number of years. Analysis of national statistics by Rowlands and Statham (2009) demonstrates that rising numbers of children entering the care system is mostly due to their compulsory removal from their families through the courts. In these cases, children have needed protection from parents who may have had a number of problems, with some interrelated; including problems with drug and alcohol abuse, mental illness and domestic violence. The number of children and young people becoming looked after (or 'in care') has therefore increased year on year since 1994 with only a minor drop in numbers in 2004 (Rowlands and Statham, 2009). Statistics show that on 31 March 2010, there were 64,400 looked after children and young people in England, an increase of 6 per cent from 2009 and an increase of 7 per cent since 2006 (DfE, 2010a). Government statistics for the year ending



March 2014 shows that since then there have been further increases in the numbers of looked after children:

*an increase of 1% compared to 31 March 2013 and an increase of 7% compared to 31 March 2010. The number of looked after children has increased steadily over the past five years and it is now higher than at any point since 1985 (DfE, 2014, p4).*

High profile child abuse cases including that of Peter Connelly in Haringey, (DfE, 2010) has had a significant impact on these increases. These continuing rises in the looked after children population has also created significant cost pressures and a high demand for services within the context of public sector austerity. Data shows that there has been a 50% increase in care leavers from 2003/2004 to 2013/2014 (National Audit Office, 2015, p4). Local authorities have been forced to prioritise their services and this can mean that the needs of care leavers are seen as less of a priority compared to younger groups of children in the care system. Due to the rise in numbers of children in the care system there has also been a concomitant increase in the numbers of young people using leaving care services. Data shows there were 8,200 young care leavers in 2006 and 9,100 in 2010 (DfE, 2010a).

Data from a cohort of 6,200 young care leavers (year ending March 2010) who were 19 years old (in March 2010) but who were looked after on the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2007 shows outcomes in relation to a number of measures. Within the group, 460 were in higher education; 1,900 in other education programmes; 1,500 in training or employment; 290 not in education /employment or training due to illness; 1700 not in education /employment/ training owing to other reasons and the rest of the young people were not in touch with services. Over recent years there has been a consistent figure of 7% of care leavers in higher education and the

numbers of care leavers in education other than higher education has increased from 26% in 2009 to 30% in 2010. However, the numbers of care leavers not in education, employment or training ('NEETS') also increased from 26% in 2009 to 28% in 2010 (DfE, 2010a). When considering data from a number of years ago, improvements are marked. In 1998 only 17.5 per cent of young people were in education or training (Stein, 2004, p20) and now more than half of care leavers are in education, training or employment (at 31 March 2010, DfEa).

The Social Exclusion Unit report (2003) '*A Better Education for Children in Care*' highlighted concerns about education attainment for all looked after children and there have been considerable efforts to improve the education attainment of children in care. Statistical data shows a number of factors are associated with higher levels of educational achievement: stable placements, lengthy or delayed process of leaving care plus caring and supportive relationships with adults who are encouraging and interested in education (Stein, 2006). The importance of stability and security in relation to outcomes for young people is explored in an Australian research study (Cashmore and Paxman, 2006). Although this study was not based in the UK, the findings remain relevant because there are similarities between the legislative and practice frameworks across the two jurisdictions. The study found that 'a number of in-care and after-care factors were significantly associated with more positive outcomes 4-5 years after leaving care' (Cashmore and Paxman, 2006, p238). Positive outcomes in the leaving care system were correlated with children who had experienced fewer placements whilst in care thus ensuring greater stability and emotional security. The researchers referred to the term, 'felt security' and measured this by asking a number of questions focused on whether they young people had felt loved by anyone, felt they were listened to and asked whether they had lived somewhere when in care that they could call home. Young people,

who had a stable foster placement, were provided with emotional security and support after leaving care had the most positive outcomes across a number of areas.

Statistical data in relation to housing and accommodation with the same group of 6,200 young care leavers shows a mixed picture in relation to accommodation. Of the group, 730 young people were living with parents or relatives; 290 in a community home; 620 in semi-independent transitional accommodation; 640 in supported lodgings; 280 in ordinary lodgings; 80 in 'foyers'; 2,600 in independent accommodation; 30 in emergency accommodation; 40 in bed and breakfast; 160 in custody; 350 in other accommodation and 350 were not in touch (DfE, 2010a). Due to the differing age ranges from 16 years old through to twenty years plus, young people were in a variety of different accommodation which reflects the stage of their transition through care leaving to adulthood. However, the aim for most care leavers is to secure their own tenancy where they can make a permanent home. Of the group of young people referred to here, 2,600 had reached this status which represents 41% of the cohort.

### The public policy context

Public policy and the legislative framework in relation to young people leaving care has changed over the past fifty years and has also changed over the period of this doctoral study which was between 2006 and 2015. This has been reflected in Chapter 2- Section i – Legislative and Policy Context showing the changes in statistical data and broader policy shifts. At the end of this section there are details about the changing socio-political context in relation to when the research was carried out which was between 2007 and 2009 and how this links to the currency of this doctoral study.

Changes in child welfare have been influenced by society's views about the meaning of childhood and adulthood and what the transitional journey through adolescence to adulthood should involve. Nevertheless, it is well documented that care leavers frequently experience a difficult and arduous journey to adulthood which has often been poorly understood by those who were supposed to be helping them.

*'In contrast to the extended transitions made by most young people, the journey to adulthood for many young care leavers is shorter, steeper and often more hazardous' (Stein, 2005, p.1).*

It is now enshrined in policy documents that: 'Care leavers should expect the same level of care and support that others would expect from a reasonable parent' (DfE, 2010b, p.3). This statement underpins the forthcoming discussion in relation to how services for care leavers have developed and illustrates why this statement needed to be made. Although this statement was made by the outgoing Labour government it has been upheld by the subsequent Coalition and Conservative governments. Recently, the need for better support for care leavers has become a greater political priority and new measures were announced in the Queen's Speech to Parliament on the 18<sup>th</sup> May 2016. They are discussed further in Chapter 7, 'Implications for Practice, Policy and Research (p175)

Some of the duties and powers associated with young people leaving care originate from early legislation, dating back to 1948. The Children Act 1948 laid down the post-war legal framework of duties and powers concerning after-care support and practice with young people leaving care. It was accepted that those children who were unable to return home normally remained in care until they were 18 years of age which then became the standard age of leaving care in children departments. This was linked to the age of 18 years being considered to be the average age of entering into adulthood, coinciding with completion of apprenticeships (Briggs,

2008). After-care support in hostels was often provided for young people in order to prepare them for adult responsibilities. Attention was focused on young people using practical and social skills, to finding accommodation and employment so that they could support themselves (Stein 2004).

The Children and Young Person Act 1969 (implemented in 1971) saw the restructuring of social services with shifts in organisational structures resulting in social workers moving towards working in generic teams. Within these teams, staff were expected to undertake a range of duties with service users from every age group. The aim was holistic practice with whole families, whereas the reality was often that clients who were deemed to be less vulnerable received a minimal service. Care leavers often fell into this category and were not deemed to be a priority for social services. This led to a decline in specialist aftercare provision and a reduction in the age young people left care, often as young as 16 years old. These developments are discussed by Stein (2004, 2005) and linked to the theoretical and ideological shifts towards radical Marxist theory in social work practice which were occurring at this time. These shifts meant there was a rejection by many of psychological theories which were viewed as oppressive and pathologising (Bower, 2005). It was argued by Stein (2004) that these theoretical and ideological shifts created a 'philosophical and theoretical void' (p15) resulting in a significant lack of policy coherence for young care leavers who were often left to fend for themselves. Stein (2004) noted that although practice had become increasingly influenced by the development of children's rights, this was not balanced with an understanding of the emotional and practical support which is also needed. Children's rights and advocacy therefore operated 'in a climate of denial and welfare planning blight' (Stein, 2004, p15) which had a detrimental impact on young people leaving care.

Concerns regarding the growing challenges faced by care leavers continued to increase in the 1970s and 1980s. There was a great deal of campaigning by young people themselves which led to widespread publicity and research surrounding the problems they encountered. These included: accommodation problems; social isolation; unemployment and inadequate social services support (Godek, 1976; Stein and Carey 1986). The messages from young people and researchers who sought to capture and publicise their situation became more widely circulated and were formalized through the publication of *'Who cares? Young people in care Speak Out'* (Page and Clark, 1977). This led to the establishment of the National Association of Young People in Care (NAYPIC).

Attempts were made to address some of the issues within the development of the Child Care Act 1980. The Act stated that local authorities had a duty to advise and befriend young people between the ages of 16 to 18 who were in care on reaching the age of 16 years. Section 27 of the Child Care Act 1980 also allowed the local authority the discretion to make contributions for accommodation and maintenance with education and work. Broad (1998) discussed the problems with the *'discretionary'* nature of the powers which resulted in many young people not being offered the services they needed. This was clearly evidenced in a research study by Stein and Carey (1986). Over a period of two and a half years (from 1982) they undertook research with young people leaving care. Findings showed that life was very precarious for care leavers with budgeting a major anxiety, accompanied by numerous changes in accommodation; unemployment and poverty plus experiences of social isolation with minimal support from social work services (Cocker and Allain, 2013, p. 196). However, it was the discretionary nature of the powers within the 1980 Act that so disadvantaged the young people in Stein and Carey's 1986 study in terms of lack of financial, practical and emotional support.

The concerns raised by campaigners, researchers and young people strengthened the case for legal reform and shifts in public policy. The Children Act 1989 introduced a duty for local authorities to prepare young people who were looked after, for adult life. The powers and duties of local authorities with respect to care leavers was applicable to young people leaving care when aged 16 years or over, and continued until the young person reached 21 years of age. It was within Section 24 of the Children Act 1989 that the powers and duties of local authorities were stipulated. The Children Act 1989 also provided local authorities with the power to provide financial assistance connected to the young person's further education, employment or training beyond the age of 21 years to enable them to complete this. The Children Act 1989 was seen as progressive in many respects, (Frost and Parton 2009) yet was critiqued for not being robust enough in relation to leaving care provision (Broad, 1998). However, the profile and needs of care leavers was raised through the enactment of the Act which paved the way for more specialist leaving care schemes (Broad, 1998).

Ongoing demands for change and improvements for care leavers resulted in The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 which was introduced in 2001. The Act drew on the findings from the consultation document '*Me, Survive, Out There?*' which was created in response to the Children's Safeguarding Review (Utting 1997). The review highlighted how young people leaving care were not being supported adequately in relation to learning independent living skills whilst in care and were then ejected from care with minimal on-going support. The consultation document formed part of a major effort, through local and central government partnership to achieve a better future for young people. The paper built on the Quality Protects Programme of which one of the eight objectives for local authority children's social services was to '*ensure that young people leaving care, as they enter adulthood, are not isolated and can participate socially and economically as citizens*' (Department of Health, 1999).

The overall aim of the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 was to improve the life chances of young people leaving care. The aim was to achieve this by delaying young people's discharge from care until they were prepared and ready to leave; enhancing the assessment process, preparation and planning for leaving care; providing better personal support for young people after care; and improving the financial arrangements for care leavers. New duties under the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 included providing financial support to care leavers, appointing Personal Advisors for care leavers who were between 16 and 21 years and beyond this if this was required (Brammer 2010). There is evidence that this legislation did create positive changes as 'annual statistics showed that local authorities were staying in touch with care leavers more effectively than ever before' (Rowlands and Statham, 2009, p.80).

A revised framework; '*Volume 3: Planning Transition to Adulthood for Care Leavers (including guidance on The Care Leavers (England) Regulations 2010)*' published by the Department of Education in October 2010(b) came into force in April 2011. The guidance gives information about the *Care Leavers (England) Regulations 2010* which replaces some of the previous guidance and regulations associated with the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000. In addition, The Children and Young Person Act 2008 became law on the 13th November 2008, and included a number of provisions from the White Paper, *Care Matters: Time for change* (2007). Care Matters set out the then Labour government's plans to improve the outcomes for children in care and care leavers. The White Paper followed the Green Paper consultation, '*Care Matters: Transforming the lives of children and young people in care*', issued in October 2006. Specific areas of The Children and Young Person Act (2008) amend provision within the Children Act 1989.



Within the new guidance, there was a focus on adolescents in care and those making the transition from care into independence with key changes in relation to accommodation and placement moves. It was stated that looked after children must not move from a regulated placement such as foster care or a children's home to an unregulated placement or accommodation without a formal review chaired by an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO). The IRO has to be in a position to confirm that the young person is ready for the transition and that the new accommodation will meet their needs. Local authorities also introduced a discretionary Higher Education Bursary for care leavers of £2000. In addition, care leavers under the age of 25 years who wish to take up a course of education or training have the option of returning to their local authority to receive support from a Personal Adviser.

In terms of the framework; '*Planning Transition to Adulthood for Care Leavers (DfE, 2010b)* Provision was made regarding the advice, assistance and support local authorities give to children and young people aged 16 years and over who are no longer "looked after". The framework aimed to ensure care leavers were given the same level of care and support that their peers would expect from a responsible parent and that they were provided with the opportunities and chances needed to help them move successfully to adulthood. In addition, the new guidance replaced a number of existing regulations governing work with looked after children and care leavers and amalgamated them into four areas. The aim was to create a more coherent and integrated structure for planning and case review and to also improve the clarity and consistency of the regulatory framework for looked after children and care leavers.

From the age of 18, young people are no longer legally "looked after" and are care leavers.

There are three main groupings of young people who are entitled to leaving care support. The law refers to them as 'children' as they are under 18 years old; the specific categories are: eligible children, relevant children and former relevant children.

*Eligible* children are defined as young people who are looked after and are 16 or 17 years old. To be 'eligible' they need to have been looked after by a local authority for a period of 13 weeks or periods amounting in total to 13 weeks, which began after they reached 14 years and ended after they reached 16 years.

*Relevant* children are young people who are not looked after, are aged 16 or 17 years, and were, before they last ceased to be looked after, an eligible child. There are a further two categories in relation to relevant children as identified in the Children Act 1989 and the Care Leavers Regulations. The first additional category in relation to a relevant young person is someone who is 16 or 17 years old, is not looked after currently, but before they last ceased to be looked after, was an eligible child and at the time they became 16 years old they were detained on remand or in another secure institution. The second additional category of a relevant young person is specified in Regulation 3 of the Care Leavers Regulations. It refers to a young person aged 16 or 17 years, who is not currently looked after, but before they last ceased to be looked after, was an eligible child. Since then, the young person will have lived for a continuous period, of six months or more with a parent or someone with parental responsibility. If the living arrangements break down and the young person ceases to live with the person concerned, then the young person should be treated as a relevant child.

*Former relevant children* are young people who are aged 18 years or above and either

have been a relevant child or would be one if they were under 18, or immediately before they ceased to be looked after at age 18 years old was an eligible child.

There is a further fourth category referred to as young people who are eligible for advice and assistance and are between 16 and 21 years and to whom a special guardianship order is in force (or was in force when they reached 18). For young people living in foster care or a residential children's home, the first statutory review following their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday should consider whether a "Staying Put" plan is needed ('Staying Put Arrangement'-(SG 3.125, Standard 12.4, DfE, 2010b, p.52). This could involve the young person staying with their foster carer or in the residential children's home where they are currently placed up until they are 18 years old or beyond this. Given the acute shortage of foster carers and concerns about budgets, it seems likely that this arrangement will only be used in the most exceptional circumstances. It is stated that planning discussions should consider what the wishes of the young person are and the timings of any planned moves to semi-independent accommodation as their training or education should not be compromised or disrupted with placement moves.

As can be seen above, the legislation and policy regulations specify different levels of support for young people leaving care dependent on whether they are *eligible* children, *relevant* children or *former relevant* children. The common factor however, for all young people leaving care is that 'there is a duty on local authorities to keep in touch with their care leavers until at least the age of 21' (Brammer, 2010, p. 304). In addition each young person who is an eligible, relevant or former relevant child should have a pathway plan, a personal advisor and be provided with support and assistance in relation to education, training and employment. They should also be provided with suitable accommodation and receive

financial support plus expert assistance in relation to managing a household budget and managing personal finances.

Not all looked after children become eligible for leaving care support as the looked after population is fluid with many children and young people entering and leaving care a number of times (Forrester, et al 2009). However, if a young person is eligible for leaving care support then this should continue until they reach the age of 21 or, if they are being helped with education or training, to the end of the agreed programme of education or training (which can take them beyond their 25 birthday)' DfE, 2010b, p10). In order to improve coordination across Government departments for care leavers, the government produced a cross-departmental strategy (Department for Education, 2013) which links key service areas including education, housing, youth justice and overall support for care leavers. This strategy is subject to regular review with Government departments held to account for actions in their areas. This commitment to a coherent approach helps to close the gaps and anomalies which care leavers experience in their drive to achieve independence.

Up until the Queens Speech of the 18<sup>th</sup> May 2016, there had been minimal policy and legislative changes for care leavers since beginning this doctoral study. However, there have been significant changes in overall social welfare policy and in social work education policy. It is important to discuss the changing socio-political context in relation to when the research was carried out (which was between 2007 and 2009) as this demonstrates how the currency of this doctoral study remains relevant. The data was gathered and analysed during the period of the 'New Labour' government (2009-2010) where the approach to welfare was one driven by reducing dependency on the welfare state, of eradicating child poverty, tackling social exclusion and on prevention and early intervention (Parton, 2014). There was a concomitant

growth in managerialism which was seen as an effective approach to tackling inter-related social problems. It is argued by Parton (2014) that this led to an individualist approach which has continued and intensified throughout the period of the Conservative-led coalition and remains a central approach of the current Conservative government.

Initially, the Coalition government expressed a wish for the engagement of communities in what was termed, 'the Big Society'. For care leavers struggling to make their way from care services to living alone, this was unlikely to be meaningful and something they could engage in. Following this, there has been a prolonged series of cutbacks to the welfare state, both during the Coalition and now with the current Conservative government. This has impacted on all public services used by care leavers including health, housing, welfare, education and employment. This current model of government is described as the development of an 'authoritarian neoliberal state' (Parton, 2014, p139) which is characterised by the privatization of welfare, by competition, incentive payments and marketisation.

There have also been extensive changes to social work education since 2007 with instrumentalisation of the profession and much greater prescription in relation to the curriculum (Higgins, 2015). Despite this there has been a continued commitment by government to involving service users, including young people in participatory activities in social work education. This remains financed through the Education Support Grant although recent reviews and a consultation (DoH, 2014) indicates that the overall funding of social work education is changing. How this will impact on service user participation is not clear. There are clear tensions and parallels between social work practice and educational contexts in relation to increasing privatization, competition and rationing of resources. However,

students have reported that being directly taught by service users has enhanced their learning and they have been able to use this in their practice (Irvine et al, 2015).

The legislative framework for care leavers has remained the same - The Children (Leaving Care) Act (2000) -with some minor amendments previously discussed, including further provisions for care leavers to access support up until they reach the age of 25 years. Despite the policy initiatives and stated commitment by successive governments to raising the life chances of children in care, who then become care leavers a recent National Audit Office Report (NAO) (DfE, 2015) highlights the severe challenges which remain for care leavers. 'While there is a clear legal framework and an inspection regime in place, the system is not working effectively to deliver good outcomes for all care leavers' (DfE, 2015, p10). This summary document by the National Audit Office- ' "Care leavers" transition to adulthood' clearly shows that many of the findings from this doctoral study with data gathered in 2007-2009 remain a concern. This is discussed within the discussion of findings in Chapter 5.

In summary, government policies and legislation over the preceding fifty years has shifted from a laissez-faire approach towards an increasing recognition of the importance of supporting care leavers at critical junctures in their journey to adulthood. There is greater awareness of the shifting profile of the care population and how many children and young people will spend a short time in care and return home without recourse to accessing leaving care services (Stein 2005; Forrester, et al, 2009). However, the statistical data presented shows that a significant number do remain 'looked after' and leave the care of the local authority between the ages of 16 to 18 years with the expectation that they live independently in the community from 18 years old. In addition, data from Rowlands and Statham's (2009) research highlights how the implementation of tighter rules and higher thresholds of admission to care has resulted in a

concentration of children in the care system who have had severely disadvantaged backgrounds due to pre-care experiences of abuse. This then impacts on outcomes for care leavers who are largely drawn from this population.

Young people's experiences of leaving care have been shaped by and have shaped the policy and legislative landscape. The analysis in this section shows how contemporary debates about the current, extended adolescence of most young people is not something experienced by care leavers; many of whom invariably have a rapid and sometimes unforgiving catapulting towards adult responsibilities frequently with a limited safety net when things go wrong (Briggs, 2008). There are a number of tensions apparent between the policy rhetoric relating to the needs of care leavers; what care leavers themselves say they need plus the realities of social work practice within an environment of scarce resources. The philosophical underpinnings of social welfare policy in relation to children in care and care leavers clearly support strategies for social inclusion and participation; how this can be realised in both social work education and practice is one of the aims of this study.

## **Section ii: Literature Review: Transitions, Social Capital and Care Leavers**

The next two sections present the literature and underpinning theoretical framework for this doctoral project with links made between policy discourse, research and theory. There is an exploration of knowledge from sociology, social policy and psychology plus knowledge from my own subject discipline, social work. This section explores key theoretical ideas in relation to transitions, social capital and care leavers. The next section of the literature review focuses on the literature and knowledge in relation to the social work curriculum, transformational learning and the involvement of young people as service users or ‘experts by experience’. This section begins by exploring the literature relating to the concepts of transitions and liminality and how they link to young care leavers’ experiences of seeking accommodation, health, education and employment plus social relationships and identity. The theoretical concepts of transitions and liminality are used as they help to embed the experiences of care leavers within a relevant psycho-social theoretical framework. This is followed by an examination of Bourdieu and social capital and how this connects with the experiences of young people. This study utilises Bourdieu’s (1997) sociological concept of social capital and the ways in which care leavers can build their own social capital and how professionals can support them in this endeavour. Gaps in the literature in relation to social capital, care leavers, transitions and service user involvement are identified.

## **Transitions**

In this study, transitions are defined as the processes and experiences care leavers have whilst navigating the journey from adolescence through to young adulthood plus the transition from being ‘in care’ through to leaving care. In effect, care leavers manage multiple transitions and have already experienced transitions within the care system from home to foster care and perhaps additional placement moves. In this section, the unique experiences of



the transitions of unaccompanied young people are also considered. The leaving care transition process also involves an intermediate phase. Intermediate phases in the processes of transition have been identified as liminal by Van Gennep (1960). Liminal experiences are often ambiguous, lack clear pathways and may be marked by uncertainty about what the outcome might be. Links are made with the liminal and transitional experiences of the young people involved in this doctoral research project who communicated how aspects of their journey through transitioning to independence were characterised in part by uncertainty, dilemmas and ambiguity, which was in turn influenced by their unique care histories.

Transitions are significant and are experienced in everyone's lives. However, care leavers' journeys through transitions are unique and outside that experienced by most of their peer group. The previous section's policy analysis demonstrated how care leavers live independently from 18 years old which is significantly different to most other young people who often remain dependent on their parents well into their twenties (Briggs, 2008; Sudbery, 2010). The extended journey to adulthood and independence for most young people is due to changes in the labour market and other economic factors including access to housing. Transitions are also 'shaped by social class, gender, ethnicity and locality' (Wade and Dixon, 2006, p.200).

Young people who live with their families have less abrupt transitions to living independently and may over a period of many years, leave and return home several times. Their place in the family home both in terms of a physical space plus emotional support often remains constant creating a 'slow track' to adulthood (Briggs, 2008). In this environment, mistakes can be tolerated and rectified whereas for care leavers it may feel like an unavoidable hurtling towards independence even when they have made mistakes and find themselves on a difficult

path. This issue is highlighted by Briggs (2008) who discusses the two stages of adolescence: the transition from childhood to puberty and the long extended secondary transition into adulthood lasting perhaps for ten years. It is this latter transition accompanied by a 'psychosocial moratorium' which is less likely to be open to care leavers. The concept of the 'moratorium' was developed by Erikson (1963 cited by Sudbery 2010) as part of his theory of the life cycle. The concept is theorised as being a 'playful space for the consolidation of identity in the time gap between the development of biological maturity and taking up adult roles' (Briggs, 2008 p.11). It is argued that this enables young people to delay taking on obligations and responsibilities normally associated with the adult world which gives them the opportunity to develop their identity; who they are and what they want out of life.

Briggs (2008) also discusses the differences and risks associated between those young people who take the 'fast track' to adulthood and those who remain on the 'slow track'. It is those young people who are the most vulnerable and disadvantaged, including care leavers, who are more likely to be hurtling through on the 'fast-track' to adulthood. However, government policies have tried to mitigate against this by putting in place a number of safeguards including educational opportunities and greater practical and emotional support for care leavers. Studies show that the fast-track route to adulthood is more likely to lead to poverty and social exclusion (Stein, 2005; Barn et al, 2005). Briggs argues that the 'timing of when young people leave home on a more or less permanent basis reveals a great deal about their social, emotional and financial capital' (Briggs, 2008, p. 180). This project examines the links between care leavers' experiences of the transition to independence and the development of social capital.

Hopson's (in Sudbery, 2010, p. 117) model of transitions highlights the demands involved in undertaking challenging and sometimes unwanted transitions. He identified seven critical stages beginning with *immobilisation* which is characterised as involving feelings of being overwhelmed, moving onto *reaction* with which could result in elation, despair or minimisation and denial depending on the nature of the experience. The third juncture is described as a period of *self-doubt* where 'the person becomes particularly conscious of the implications and challenges ahead' (Sudbery, 2010, p. 117). This could also be viewed as a liminal phase. The fourth stage of '*letting go*', can be described as a turning point where the individual focuses more on the future even if it involves stepping off into new uncharted territory. The fifth phase is described as '*testing*' where the individual tries out new ideas and identities. The penultimate stage involves '*the search for meaning*' where there is reflective thought about the experience of the transition and the final phase is '*integration*' where experiences are consolidated and integrated holistically. Part of this final stage is achieving in part, a sense of belonging and identity. Noam (1999) cited by Briggs, 2008, argues, 'that a sense of belonging is an important component of adolescent development' (p.62). For care leavers a sense of belonging can be one of the most difficult things to achieve as their family and friends' networks may be fragile, severed or severely disrupted.

The unique position of unaccompanied asylum seeking young people who become looked after children and then experience the leaving care system requires additional analysis and discussion. They have often had difficult journeys across dangerous terrain and left behind all those they love yet they may feel they cannot share their story. Kohli (2007) refers to their stories seeming 'only to begin when they become visible as asylum seekers' (p.27). He argues that in order to see the whole person and their history of ordinary living we need to look further than the point of their departure from their own country of origin (p27). He refers

to three domains as being illustrative of the resettlement process for young people who are unaccompanied: the domain of cohesion; of connection and of coherence (Kohli, 2007, p154-155). Each domain is described as having its own unique characteristics with the first, 'cohesion' focused on 'bringing order to the outer world' for the young people (p154); the second domain, 'connection' is focused on resettling and supporting the emotional states of the young people and the third, 'coherence' is where the past and the present of the young people can be integrated and brought forward into the future.

Although Kohli (2007) does not link these domains directly to the leaving care process, it can be argued that they are highly relevant for all care leavers, including unaccompanied asylum seeking young people. Kohli (2007) describes how social workers work within each domain with 'cohesion' linked to social workers as 'the humanitarians' where the primary focus is on practical support and guidance. He describes social workers who are focused on the 'connection' domain as 'the witnesses' as they offer emotional support and containment and social workers who are working within the 'coherence' domain as 'the confederates'. Social workers in this latter group expressed affection for the young people and were cognisant of their resilience and 'capacity to survive and do well' (Kohli, 2007, p157). Workers operating in this domain were able to focus on helping young people who may have been leaving care or living independently to build new lives yet as part of this they sought to integrate old lives and previous histories thus seeing the young people holistically.

### **Social relations and identity**

Research undertaken by Biehal, et al (1995) demonstrates the importance of care leavers having access to a 'coherent narrative' (p.106) from their case files to help them shape and understand their identity. Care leavers may feel 'defined by their difference...or 'at odds with others' (Horrocks and Goddard 2006, p.266) and being able to have answers to questions about their history enables the building of self-esteem and promotes resilience. A study by Horrocks and Goddard (2006) showed that from 81 local authorities surveyed in 2004, there had been 1729 file requests from adults who had been in care. Interviews with the adults seeking access to records were undertaken and reasons noted about why they had sought access to their case files.

There were two main reasons: the first being a desire to know why they were in care and what their experiences had been. Second; some care leavers wanted specific information about relatives or had concerns about abuse and wanted to know what had happened to them (Horrocks and Goddard 2006, p.269). The researchers refer to a study by Pugh (1999) which involved interviews with adults who had been in care with Barnardo's. This study also showed how the desire to know about past history linked directly to identity development. Some of the key themes included: 'the meaning and significance of roots, primarily blood ties; the need to know, basic curiosity about one's past; creating a coherent self-image; and the centrality of emotion involved in this process' (Horrocks and Goddard, 2006, p.269).

Issues of identity, social relationships and where young care leavers' access support networks are examined in a study by Wade (2008). The research focused on support networks was part of a larger study which followed the transition experiences of 106 care leavers over a twelve to fifteen month period. Within the cohort of young people, all apart from one young person

was sixteen to eighteen years old; just over half were female; 44 per cent were thought to have mental health issues or emotional and behavioural difficulties and 17 per cent had a sensory, physical or learning disability (Wade 2008, p.41). Interviews were undertaken a few months after leaving care and were repeated after nine months. The research showed that most young people - 81% - had at least fortnightly contact with family members; most common was contact with siblings and birth mothers. In addition, when young people were asked to identify the 'key person in their relationship network' (Wade, 2008, p.43) most young people once again identified a sibling or their mother.

This re-establishing of relationships and seeking to maintain contact with family can be viewed as an attempt to develop a sense of belonging through re-connecting with family 'roots'. However, birth family contacts were sometimes fragile and precarious and sometimes resulted in the young person feeling let down and rejected all over again. Wade (2008) discussed the challenges for workers in trying to support fragile family and friends relationship networks. This can be due to reluctance of the young person to involve professionals accompanied by a recognition that workers tend to prioritise input in relation to education, housing and employment. However, loneliness and social isolation is a reality for many care leavers. Some young people in Wade's (2008) study were in contact with previous foster carers but this reduced quickly by the nine month follow up stage. In addition, it was recognised that compared to young people from birth families, they did not have the opportunity for special occasion visits and telephone contact which 'can provide considerable emotional support and reassurance for young people when they leave home' (Wade, 2008, p. 49). In seeking to alleviate this, it is argued that some young people may enter into adult relationships at a young age which may in turn result in them creating their own family.

### **Health and well-being**

One of the significant health concerns for care leavers is in relation to access to sexual health services. Another health issue of importance is emotional and mental health support for care leavers. Research has shown higher levels of teenage pregnancy and parenthood in relation to young care leavers (Biehal et al., 1995; Brodie, et al 1997). In the study by Wade (2008) one of the findings identified that 18% of the young people sought to create a sense of belonging and security through relationships with partners, partners' families and through becoming young parents. In the Social Exclusion Unit Report (1999) a cluster of factors related to the likelihood of teenage pregnancy were identified and one was in relation to being a care leaver. Despite the challenges, the young parents in Wade's research (2008) were happy and proud to be parents.

Similarly, in research by Corlyon and McGuire (1997) the young people in care and leaving care said that one of the positives of becoming a parent was that it gave a focus and someone to care for which in turn gave a sense of rootedness and stability in an otherwise disrupted life. In a study by Chase et al (2006), 63 young people in care and leaving care were interviewed. Many of the young people expressed feelings of loneliness and rejection from their families and felt ill-prepared for adulthood in relation to accessing health care and sexual health services. 'Ninety per cent of young people interviewed reported none or sporadic use of contraception'... but said they were 'shocked' when informed of their pregnancy (Chase et al, 2006) p 442). The researchers reported that one of the most striking findings of their study was the feelings of loneliness and abandonment expressed by the young people and how the wish for love and care was a priority. This compares very differently to the experiences of many young people who live with their families.

A research study by Barn et al (2005) which focused on post-care outcomes for 261 care leavers also included a sub-set of fifty-five young people who were parents (Barn and Mantovani, 2007). In the study a lack of protective factors in relation to early parenthood were identified as significant for the sample. It was found that many of the young people had experienced family disruption and a high number of placement moves; they had low levels of educational attainment and 47 per cent of the sample had been excluded from school, some permanently. Almost one third of the young women who were parents had experienced some mental health and/or emotional difficulties although for many young people parenthood provided a 'focus ...and a drive to achieve a position' (Barn and Mantovani, 2007, p. 237) and young women were generally positive about parenthood. Similarly positive feelings about parenthood were expressed by young fathers who were also care leavers in a study by Tyrer et al, (2006). Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data from sixteen young men aged between 15 and 24 years. Thirteen of the group were already fathers and three were about to become fathers. Most of the young fathers expressed joy and positive feelings towards their children, although most of the young men who were interviewed 'faced social exclusion on a number of levels including little financial security; low educational achievement; and poor work prospects' (Tyrer et al, 2006, p.1113).

Vulnerability to poorer health outcomes overall for care leavers and young people in care have been identified by a number of research studies (Saunders and Broad, 1997; House of Commons Health Report, 1998). Dixon (2008) researched health outcomes in relation to care leavers drawing data from a sample of 106 young people. One of the main health issues was in relation to 'one in 10 of the young people' experiencing mental health problems (Dixon, 2008, p210) with 42% identified as having emotional and behavioural difficulties. In addition, 18% had problems with drug and alcohol misuse which rose to 32% at the follow-



up stage. There are links between mental health difficulties and substance misuse and this is evident in this study. The researchers reported that most young people (59%) rated as well at the baseline point although 61% stated they had health problems at the follow up stage; primarily related to stress, depression and anxiety. The research showed that young people did receive support for the problems they were experiencing but many found the transition to leaving care extremely challenging which impacted on their health and well-being. As stated by Akister, et al (2010) the transition out of care can increase vulnerabilities in an already vulnerable group of young people.

## **Housing**

Poor housing and homelessness have been pressing concerns in relation to care leavers over a number of decades. Research by Centrepont (Randall 1988, 1989) shows how the years of raising awareness and lobbying for change has resulted in improvements to legislation and policy in this area. Nevertheless, studies focused on homelessness have highlighted the increased risks for care leavers (Biehal and Wade 1999; Dixon and Stein 2005). In the study by Wade and Dixon (2006) involving 106 care leavers, issues in relation to housing and employment were examined. The researchers gathered base-line data at the commencement of the research and follow up data 9-10 months later. They found that housing provision services for care leavers from the seven participating local authorities was generally good. The young people were found to be living in a variety of housing in accordance with their needs; some was supported housing, other young people had their own tenancies. Almost two-thirds of the young people had stable housing with limited mobility which was positive. Although 'over one third had moved two or more times and one in five of the young people had moved more than four times and over one third had experienced homelessness since leaving care' (Wade and Dixon, 2006, p202).

The researchers examined the risk factors in relation to homelessness and housing instability and found there was a correlation with emotional and mental health difficulties, substance misuse, offending and a previous pattern of absconding from care. They discussed how a history of absconding or running away repeatedly 'can lead to a pattern of detachment' (Wade and Dixon 2006) as it links also with offending, substance misuse and truancy. This can then make it more difficult for young people to settle into adult life and establish themselves in conventional ways. At the follow-up stage, 56% of the young people had a positive housing outcome, 31% a fair outcome and 74% were living in accommodation matched to their needs. Nearly all the young people reported being helped in the area of housing and in settling in.

In a study by Simon (2008) there was a focus on how care leavers use housing services. The research focused on 80 care leavers plus a comparative sample group of 59 young people described as 'in difficulty' and disadvantaged in accordance with measures from the Social Exclusion Unit Report (2005). The study found that the care leavers had more positive transitions to independent living, were more skilled at accessing support and were less likely to experience homelessness. One of the factors identified as important was the strong support from leaving care social workers who helped to advocate on behalf of the young people and were skilled at negotiating good outcomes for care leavers. However, the care leavers in the sample who had left care prior to the introduction of the Children (Leaving Care) Act, 2000 reported difficulties with accessing support services and appropriate housing. Whereas the care leavers who received services as part of the provisions of the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 had good outcomes. Comparing more recent research with previous studies demonstrates improvements in the area of housing stability and after-care support. For

example in a study by Biehal et al (1995) where the researchers surveyed young care leavers from three local authority social services departments, they found that only 25% of the young people moved to permanent accommodation when they left care and 44% moved to temporary lodgings or bedsits.

Whereas in more recent studies (Wade and Dixon 2006; Simon, 2008) it was evident that young people received higher levels of support with more positive housing outcomes. It is argued that having specific policies, practice guidance and legislation has had a positive outcome for higher numbers of care leavers. There was however an enduring theme which had not shifted and that was in relation to links between high numbers of placement moves whilst in care and greater instability after independence (Biehal et al 1994; Simon 2008). Placement stability had been recognised a key determinant of positive outcomes for looked after children and a number of initiatives have focused on this area (Ward and Skuse, 2001; Selwyn and Quinton 2004). Following the White Paper 'Care Matters', the Children and Young Persons Act 2008 set out plans to deliver better outcomes for looked after children. This legislation placed an emphasis on promoting positive outcomes in a number of areas, including placement stability with links to the 'Corporate Parenting' responsibilities of local authorities.

### **Education and employment**

Much of the research focused on education and employment in relation to care leavers has often painted a gloomy picture of failure and challenge (Biehal et al 1995; Stein, 2006). Wade and Dixon (2006) discuss how 'young people entering the care system do so with considerable (and often long lasting) educational deficits (p.204). Outcome data regarding

education attainment for looked after children shows a marked differential in educational success rates compared to children living at home with their parents. However, if data was available about the progress many children make *after* they enter the care system, a more balanced picture may emerge as the 'value added' could be incorporated into the outcomes data. Despite considerable early difficulties some studies show more positive outcomes for young people leaving care. In a summary of research into the different experiences of care leavers from a range of ethnic groups undertaken by Barn et al (2005) the education attainment of young people from white, Caribbean and dual-heritage children were discussed. It was stated that although there were high rates of school exclusion in this group, 'Caribbean young people were more likely to go on to college for further study to obtain educational qualifications' (p.2) The study involved a survey of 261 care leavers from six different local authorities.

Employment outcome data is more difficult to access although Wade and Dixon (2006) refer to research from Cheung and Heath (1994) demonstrating that low levels of education attainment and a poor employment record persists through into adulthood. Wade and Dixon (2006) found that at the follow-up stage of the 106 young people in their study, almost half were unemployed (44%), 23% were in education and 8% were caring for a child. At the baseline stage 35% of the sample was in education. They discussed the reduction in numbers at follow-up and discussed the reasons for this: unsuitable courses; financial difficulties and lack of support which affected their commitment and motivation to carry on or seek a new course of study. The researchers argued that young care leavers need intensive support to identify their strengths in order to forge a career path and develop a secure financial future.

In the first UK study of care leavers and higher education, Jackson and Ajayi (2007) describe it as an ‘exceptional achievement’ (p.62) for care leavers to go to university. Since that study, more reliable government data has been gathered (DfE, March 2011) which shows that in 2010, out of 6,200 young people leaving care only 460 were in full-time higher education and 1,900 were in other forms of education. With regards to the other young people, 1500 were in training or employment but almost 2,000 young people were not in education, training or employment and 350 were not in touch with services.

Findings from Jackson and Ajayi’s research (2007) shows that only four of the 129 research participants had attended high achieving secondary schools and many of the participants’ pre-care histories were characterised by abuse and neglect. The participants who had been in long-term foster care spoke very positively about the support and encouragement they received. Despite difficult early experiences before coming into care the young care leavers talked about the importance of their foster carers in supporting them as they felt ‘somebody really cared about what happened to them at school and wanted them to succeed’ (Jackson and Ajayi 2007, p. 66). The young people valued the structured support they received from their foster carers which was in marked contrast to that they had experienced in sometimes chaotic family situations at home. The young people discussed how their foster families’ own children sometimes acted as role models as they had been to university. In other families, foster carers themselves were graduates and had an understanding of the higher education system. The researchers discuss foster care as an educational resource and argued that support for education with young people in care or leaving care is ‘a delicate and sensitive task demanding a high level of skill and determination from foster carers’ (Jackson and Ajayi 2007, p. 71).

The issues identified by researchers have informed government policies which have in turn informed research in an iterative process. This has resulted in incremental changes and improvements for children in care and care leavers in relation to education and employment opportunities. The Social Exclusion Unit reports: 'A Better Education for Children in Care (2003) and 'Transitions, Young Adults with Complex Needs (2005) contributed to Select Committee Reports focused on looked after children providing a 'wealth of evidence and recommendations' (DCSF, 2009) for change and improvement. This has resulted in the publication of the previously discussed revised legal framework for looked after children. These are the most significant regulatory changes in respect of children in care and care leavers since the Children Act 1989. The two key documents are: *Volume 2: Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010* (DfE 2010c) and *Volume 3: Planning Transitions to Adulthood for Care Leavers: Statutory Guidance on the Care Leavers (England) Regulations 2010* (DfE 2010b). Further research into the outcomes these statutory changes may result in will add to the debates about how best care leavers can be supported on the road to independence and also what is required to build access to social and cultural capital for care leavers.

### **Bourdieu, social capital and care leavers**

This section of the literature review is underpinned by the theory of social capital and habitus. Both of these concepts were originally conceptualised by Bourdieu with the theory of social capital developed further by Coleman (1994; 1997) and Putnam (1995). These concepts provide an overarching theoretical framework and analytic device which is used to explain the unique experiences of care leavers. This theoretical perspective offers 'concepts which reflect the complexity and inter-relatedness of the real world' (Schuller, et al 2000 p. 2)

which is what this work-based doctorate has as its focus. Social capital focuses on social relationships and access to resources and using this concept provided a pathway to deepening my understanding of issues of power and the position of care leavers as service users. The authors, Schuller et al (2000) acclaim the 'heuristic potential of social capital- its capacity to open up issues rather than to provide definitive answers' (p.2). Arguably, it has become a key concept in academic research precisely because it has the potential to bring pertinent issues into view. In this case, how care leavers can be supported to develop networks and alliances through delivering learning to social work students.

However, whilst the concept of social capital has been used extensively by a number of academic disciplines it is argued by Hawkins and Maurer (2011) that social work has not been one of them. Nevertheless, they argue that although the theory has been dogged by 'conceptual controversies' (p.2) it is also 'an efficacious construct for integrating the separate aspects of social networks and support so as to analyse the by-product of social relationships in the field of social work' (p1). They describe these by-products as advantageous social relationships which give access to resources and further opportunities. They make links to ecological theory and claim that the concept of social capital makes connections beyond individual relationships to include important organisational and community links. This in turn has connections to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model which considers support and networks from the micro through to macro levels. Hawkins and Maurer (2011) describe how social support is accessed through social networks and that through these social networks there is 'the capacity to generate social capital' (p4).

Bourdieu (1986) deepened and broadened sociological analyses of social class from Marxist ideas of class, capitalism and inequality to include not only the impact of economic capital

but argued that social, cultural and symbolic capital are equally important markers in contemporary society ‘characterizing class position’ (Giddens, 2009, p.459). Feminist theorists (Adkins, 2004; Reay 2004) have also identified the importance of emotional capital which was not directly referred to by Bourdieu but has been developed out of his schema by Nowotny (1981, cited by Reay, 2004, p60) and is referred to as ... ‘a variant of social capital’. It has as its focus, close personal relationships characterised by love and emotional support. Reay (2004) states that emotional capital ‘encompasses the emotional resources you hand on to those you care about’ (p60). Whilst the analysis Reay (2004) discusses in her chapter focuses on mothers’ involvement in their children and how emotional labour is overwhelmingly carried out by women who are ‘managing the family’s emotional life’ (Reay, 2004, p59) the concept also has relevance for care leavers. Care leavers have fewer opportunities to be the recipients of emotional labour given their disrupted journeys through the care system. They are therefore less likely to experience the same depth of emotional resources being handed onto them in comparison to young people who are brought up in their birth families by their parents. The significance of emotional labour in the lives of care leavers is considered as part of the findings from the focus groups and semi-structured interviews.

The section discusses Bourdieu’s two paradigms of social capital and habitus which are embedded in his theories of how structural inequalities in society are created and maintained through cultural reproduction. Cultural reproduction is defined as, that ‘which connects economic position, social status and symbolic capital with cultural knowledge and skills’ (Giddens 2009, p.846). Three forms of capital are referred to by Bourdieu and include economic, social and cultural capital. Social capital is defined by Bourdieu as:



*The aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition...which provides each of its members with the backing of collectively –owned capital (Bourdieu 1997, p.51).*

It clearly refers to a system of reciprocal social networks and acquaintances gained through individual contacts and family connections. Inevitably, those with power and influence have more contacts with other similarly placed individuals thus it is argued that a system of invisible privilege is maintained through informal reciprocal networks. The key issue and central to the theory is that different forms of capital can be exchanged to meet individual needs plus needs of family members. In order to operationalise the concept of social capital the following definition is used as it encapsulates how social capital can be accessed and developed:

*The by-product of social interactions that are embedded in and accessed via formal and informal social relationships with individual, communities and institutions (Lin 2001, cited by Hawkins and Maurer 2011, p.4)*

A similar definition regarding social capital is offered by Putnam (1995) an American political scientist who wrote about social capital in relation to political participation and civic engagement. He describes it as ‘features of social life; networks, norms, and trust that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives’ (p.664). He argues that its application can be very beneficial to communities as it has the potential to bring people together. However, other definitions and research studies emphasise social capital as having a more individualistic thrust as it is a way of using, ‘ social knowledge and connections...to enable people to accomplish their goals and extend their influence’ (Giddens, 2009, p.817). Putnam (2000) who studied social capital in the United States; identified the concepts of *bridging* social capital and *bonding* social capital. The former is described by Giddens (2009) as an approach which creates links and bonds across different groups and

ethnicities and is ‘outward looking and inclusive’ (p.818) whereas the latter seeks to hold onto ‘existing privileges’ and is ‘inward looking and exclusive’ (p.818). Bonding social capital is said to facilitate people to ‘get by’ whereas bridging social capital helps them to ‘get on’ (Holland 2008, p.9). Putnam (2000) argues that building and sustaining citizenship and democracy is closely linked to social capital and can be strengthened by individuals belonging to clubs and organisations as paid members or volunteers. Putnam’s work was developed further by Woolcock (1998) who added a third element, *linking* social capital. This focuses on reciprocal relationship networks which facilitate the development of trust and mutually advantageous activities both informally and formally. The concept of linking social capital is used primarily in this research study along with the definition by Lin 2001 (cited by Hawkins and Maurer 2011, p.4) as it refers to social interactions using formal and informal approaches which captures the work undertaken in this work based doctorate with care leavers.

Social capital and the links between education attainment and social inequality were a primary area of focus for Coleman (1994; 1997). He made an important contribution to the theoretical and empirical development of social capital through using it in empirical research thus operationalising it. However, his work has been critiqued for over-emphasising the importance of family and kin networks with a lack of analysis and investigation into the role played by community and social networks (Field et al 2000). In a comparison table showing the relationship between human and social capital in relation to a programme of adult learning, Field et al (2000, p.250) highlight how human capital has at its focus, specific benefits to the individual. Whereas social capital centres on relationships, networks, social cohesion, citizenship and empowerment. They go on to state that whilst they share Coleman’s view that social capital is needed to create human capital and that this is a circular process;

‘he seriously understated the complexity of this relationship’ (p.261). They link this to an underdevelopment of his analysis regarding the processes of social exclusion and how social capital can exclude and limit participation of some individuals and groups. Other academics (Schuller et al, 2000) give more support to Putnam’s ideas and argue that he has ‘played a leading part in making the concept [of social capital] globally accessible and policy relevant’ (p.12).

Bourdieu also developed the concept of habitus which is described by Giddens (2009) as the use of language and manner of speaking adopted by certain groups; or mode of dress and conduct and behaviour which people use in relation to their setting. The concept has been used in educational sociology to explore why some groups of children achieve less well and feel uncomfortable or out of place in certain environments. This may be linked to the use of language, points of references, values and ways of behaving which can be linked to cultural reproduction and how values and ways of being are reinforced and transmitted through families and communities. Habitus describes where people are placed in society with this directly linked to their economic position. Habitus is not fixed or static but can change with the acquisition of social, economic and/or cultural capital. In terms of care leavers, they occupy a position in society as ‘young people’ with many shared customs, experiences, beliefs and use of language along with other young people but they also occupy a unique habitus due to their position as care leavers within the broader habitus of young people.

In this doctoral study the young people engaged with a professional habitus, social work; which although is familiar to them as service users they had to negotiate a different way of relating as part of delivering training to professional social workers and students. This was not as service users but in a more powerful and professionally equal position as ‘trainers’ and

seminar leaders. They therefore had to negotiate their interactions on a different footing. The concept of *habitus* is used here in this research study to add depth of meaning to their experiences which involved them having to 'decode... the meta-messages through interpreting words, body language, paralanguage and other behaviour' (Lefevre, 2010, p.71) of the social workers and students they were training.

The social capital of young people and how it can be developed through citizenship initiatives, employment and education has been an enduring Government concern (Whiting and Harper 2003). In the report by Whiting and Harper (2003) commissioned by the Office for National Statistics, they outlined that the emphasis for government policy with young people was building social capital to protect them from poverty, crime and social exclusion. Links were made to a 4 year research project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The focus was on youth crime, social capital and risk- taking with an exploration of the role social capital might play in the links between these concepts (Kemshall, et al, 2003). A further study (Catan, 2002) focused on young people's transitions to adulthood. Both studies analysed the impact of social capital in relation to their central themes. Research regarding social capital and young people has also been linked to policy initiatives in education with a central theme of community cohesion (DCSF 2007) and the role of extended schools creating hubs with opportunities to build and link social capital (DfES 2005). A research study undertaken in two secondary schools focused on how schools can be used as a vehicle for promoting social capital. The findings demonstrated that this could be facilitated through developing social relations and a sense of belonging plus creating good social support networks in schools (Stevens, et al 2007).

However, it is argued by Barn (2010) that although there has been a focus on developing social capital in relation to young people living within their own family networks; ‘we know little about the social capital of young people in and leaving care’ (p.832). Avery and Freundlich (2009) discuss how parents use their social capital to enhance their children’s opportunities to succeed in adulthood. They argue that social capital ‘is enhanced when the family is embedded in social relationships with other families and community institutions’ (p.252). They refer to young people leaving care (in America) and how the rupture with their families means that they ‘leave care with significant social capital deficits’ (Avery and Freundlich 2009, p253). Furstenburg (2005) argues that within families, social capital acts as a resource where there is reciprocal understanding. For care leavers it is clear that this resource is often absent or is there only partially and is fragmented and fragile. Avery and Freundlich (2009) discuss the links between the transition phase of emerging adulthood and how successful development is ‘inextricably linked to relationships with the family of origin... and that this ‘influences developmental trajectories and life changes in adulthood’ (p.252). They go on to argue that in the US care leaving system, there is too much focus on preparing practically for independent living and not enough focus on nurturing social capital. Arguably, parallels can be drawn with the UK care leaving system. For example Barn (2010) discusses how care leavers from minority ethnic groups may be denied the ‘process of racial and cultural socialisation’ (p.839) which helps young black people respond and cope with experiences of racism and negativity from society.

Issues of social capital, ethnicity and identity are discussed by Reynolds (2005) with a focus on Caribbean young people who live with their families. She argues that ‘much of the discussion that draws upon social capital to understand minority ethnic family relationships is based on racial stereotypes’ (p.6) with some communities deemed to have ‘strong’ social

networks whereas others, including the Caribbean community, being deemed to have 'weak' social capital. She argues that the measures which have been used to link family relationships and social capital in relation to ethnicity and culture have not been robust and that it is an oversimplification to come to these conclusions.

Barn (2010) also examines ethnicity and identity in relation to the position of care leavers through the prism of social capital. She uses the concept to 'explore... the context of social capital in understanding the negotiation and construction of racial and ethnic identity of young people' (p.836). Data was gathered from six different areas of England using self – report questionnaires (n=261), semi-structured interviews and focus groups (n=36) although only findings from the qualitative data were reported on. The study explored a number of issues with the group of care leavers in the sample including: preparation for leaving care and experiences post leaving care; issues in relation to housing, education and employment; income; relationships with family, friends and professionals and racial and ethnic identity. This was followed by an analysis of how the 'presence/absence of social capital can help or hinder the negotiation of a sense of individual and group identity' (Barn, 2010, p.838) with a specific focus on racial and ethnic identity development. The young people who contributed to the study expressed pride in their racial, religious and cultural heritage and stated that carers had helped them in relation to cultural and racial socialisation and feeling part of their communities. Young people who had most awareness of their cultural background were found to have stronger links with their families or members of the same community which Barn (2010) links to Bourdieuan concepts of 'capital assets...transmitted over time from one generation to the next' (p.841).

Overall, the study found that most of the young people had minimal contact with their birth families and nearly all of the young people lived alone which some found quite frightening. Barn (2010) discusses this as demonstrating an absence of social capital in relation to 'connectedness' (p.842). In addition, associations could also be made to Woolcock's (1998) concept of 'linking social capital' which gives opportunities for reciprocal relationship networks which the young people in Barn's (2010) study did not have. The young people were also not connected into their local community and most did not know people or groups in their neighbourhood. There was therefore little evidence of 'bridging social capital' as discussed by Putnam (2000). There was also discussion and analysis in relation to how and to what extent care leavers could be involved in building and using social capital. The key factors identified as important were: positives experiences of being cared for including placement stability and positive racial and cultural socialisation plus the support to build links with people and organisations from their communities.

A study by Raffo and Reeves (2000) involving thirty- one socially excluded young people examined how they used their own agency to positively manage their transition to adulthood. Many positive aspects were revealed including the strength of reciprocal networks. Another study also focused on vulnerable young people where the issue of bonding social capital and transitions was identified and analysed (Webster et al, 2004). There was recognition of the benefits of bonding social capital in providing emotional and practical support through existing networks but also the limitations it could create. This sometimes resulted in the young people becoming trapped in negative social networks with links to criminal activities and drug-abuse. There was mis-placed loyalty which held and ensnared some young people in low socio-economic groups and served to limit opportunities. The study identified how challenging it was for the young people, who were from socially

deprived backgrounds, to establish bridging social capital which may have helped to provide a way to 'get on'.

In seeking to address these issues at a policy level a number of initiatives have been introduced to support children in care and young people leaving care including drives to improve education attainment; support to improve health and well-being; reducing placement moves; family and parenting support plus improving transitions for children in care and leaving care support. The overarching concept was the idea of the local authority being a 'Corporate Parent' which emphasises the collective responsibilities of local authorities to provide good parenting for all children in their care (DCSF, 2009). A central part of this is supporting education attainment. In one London borough the concept of the 'Corporate Parent' was personalised further and senior staff members were linked with 16 year old children in care to support their education through becoming 'Education Champions'. The aim was to raise GCSE results and support young people onto the next stage of their education and training (The Independent, 17th February 2005). Although the specific local authority project did not state that the aim was to bolster the social capital of young care leavers the senior staff acted as advocates, offered mentoring and support for the young person through the using their links and influence. Therefore, it can be argued that 'Corporate Parenting' can be used to help young people increase their social capital. The links between the development of social capital in young people, education strategies and social inequality were a primary area of focus for Coleman (1997). In this section, there has also been an exploration of more recent research and policy developments regarding education and social capital. In the next section of the literature review, links are made between the concept of social capital, the involvement of service users in social work education and transformational learning. There is a focus on learning from young people who have direct experience of



care services; what the professional body guidance is in relation to service user involvement and how new approaches to practice can be developed through listening to the voices of service users.

### **Section iii: Literature Review: The social work curriculum- transformational learning and the involvement of service user and carers'**

This section explores the literature in relation to professional social work education with a focus on two specific aspects: the development of service user and carer involvement in the social work curriculum, specifically young people and transformational learning theory.

Links are made with critical reflection and how its application to working with service users in teaching social work students and social workers can lead to transformational learning.

Links are made to the previous section and the definition of social capital offered by Lin (2001) who focuses on social networks, support and social capital. As Field et al (2000) argue only through 'viewing learning as embedded in networks of social capital can we begin to grasp the complex patterns of participation and outcome that are found in the field of adult learning' (p.244).

A critical overview of key theoretical principles in relation to the social work education curriculum reveals a complex field. Similarly to other professions, social work is buffeted by competing demands and interests in relation to what social workers should know; who it should be taught by and what theories, knowledge and skills should be part of the curriculum. Guidance and standards for the social work curriculum has recently been revised with new Standards of Proficiency issued by the statutory regulator, the Health and Care Professions Council. These are linked to curriculum guidance and the professional framework for social work, the 'Professional Capabilities Framework' developed by The College of Social Work, which has since closed. It is argued by Taylor (1997) that 'professional education is distinctively different than higher education primarily because of its dynamic relationship with the professions' (p.3). Writing back in 1997 she discussed how government and

employers were strong forces in shaping the curriculum and since then the process has intensified with more prescriptive curriculum guides (The College of Social Work <http://www.tcsw.org.uk/Curriculum-Guides/>). Taylor (1997) discusses how in subjects where there is 'applied' knowledge as opposed to 'pure' knowledge they are often allocated secondary status in universities and that there are ongoing tensions about the role of professional education within universities. It was argued that much of the adult learning literature has limited applicability to professional education as it lacks discussion about the political, social and economic context which is central to the professions and touches on their daily practice. Taylor's discussion about problem-based learning links also to the model of critical reflection and transformational learning developed by Fook (2002; 2004); Fook and Gardner 2007 and Fook and Askeland (2007) which is discussed later in this section.

Problem-based learning is a key part of the pedagogical process within social work education and within professional education as it does not only focus on propositional knowledge delivered by subject experts. It is described as a way of de-constructing problems with students leading the way using their previous experiences and those of each other thus creating independent learning. Problem-based learning relies on process knowledge which is described as having four key components in relation to obtaining information (Eraut 1994). They are: 'an existing knowledge base in the area concerned; a conceptual framework to guide enquiry; and skills in collecting and interpreting information' (Taylor 1997, p.95). This approach has been highly influential within social work education and builds on recognition of the importance of integrating students' existing pre-course knowledge.

## **Social work education and the involvement of service user and carers**

The involvement of service users and carers both in social work practice and in education has continued to be a central issue in policy and practice and emerged as part of New Labour's modernisation agenda (DH 1999). Earlier work in relation to partnership approaches and teaching in social work with service users and carers using problem-based learning approaches is discussed by Taylor (1997). Within the discussion of the teaching methods used, issues of power sharing are considered. It is argued by Taylor (1997) that 'learning from service users' challenges the whole notion of expertise, who holds it, and on what basis' (p.177). It is suggested that service users hold unique knowledge and that drawing on their experiences can create new knowledge which can make students more effective social work practitioners.

The involvement of service users in the social work education curriculum has been mandatory since 2002 when the Department of Health developed the new degree in social work (DH, 2002). Service users were involved throughout the development stages and the final documentation laid down a number of requirements which programmes were required to follow in relation to how service users should be part of the delivery of the degree. It was specified that service users should be part of the selection processes for new students; be involved in assessment; placement provision; the design of the degree; teaching and learning; quality assurance and preparation for practice learning. The thinking underpinning these requirements was that service users were 'experts by experience' and that their knowledge was of primary importance in the training of social work students. Changes to the social work degree and the development of a new curriculum have continued to uphold the centrality of service user and carer involvement.

Levin (2004) argues that involving service users in social work education gives students ‘a thorough grounding in service users and carers experiences and expectations’ (p.2). Prior to the current social work degree framework it was argued by Beresford (1994) that involving service users in social work education would be beneficial in breaking down stereotypical barriers; would assist in developing partnerships and would bring new perspectives, expertise and ideas. This thinking represented a shift in perspective with more of a focus on an emancipatory approach to social work with previous approaches viewed as overly paternalistic. It was argued that service users have unique knowledge and that this could be added to existing professional knowledge thus creating more of a ‘plurality of knowledges’ (Green and Wilks 2009, p.192).

Braye (2000) identifies three specific themes which have driven forward changes and developments in relation to service user involvement in social work, they are: the legal and policy mandate; the professional mandate and the user mandate. In relation to the legal mandate in children’s services this can be seen within the Children Act 1989 with the statutory requirement to consult with children and ascertain their wishes and feelings. Also, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, in particular Article 12 focuses on children’s rights to have their views sought and listened to. Further policy documents and legislation have strengthened the legal mandate in relation to involving and listening to children and young people. This includes: the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 with subsequent amendments; Every Child Matters (DfES, 2003); the Children Act 2004 and the Children and Young Persons Act 2008, which emanated from the White Paper, *Care Matters: Time for Change* (2007). Within the White Paper it states that children in care and leaving care should have their views heard and acted on.

*'It is important that children have a chance to shape and influence the parenting that they receive at every level- from expressing their wishes and feelings about the individual care they receive in their placements, through to helping to shape the overall strategy for children in their area through a Children in Care Council' (DfES, 2007, p20).*

The professional mandate was part of the previous Codes of Practice for Social Care Workers (GSCC, 2002). This was continued within The College of Social Work's Professional Capabilities Framework, where it is highlighted that social workers should; 'value and take account of the expertise of service users, carers and professionals' (available at <http://www.collegeofsocialwork.org/pcf.aspx>).

Accompanying this guidance are the standards of proficiency from social work's new statutory regulator, the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC). One of the key standards is that social workers should, 'understand the need to promote the best interests of service users and carers at all times' (available from <http://www.hcpc-uk.org/education/downloads>). However, it is argued that this correlates with the assumption that social workers are holders of expert knowledge and hold unequal power in comparison to service users. It is contended that this imbalance of power should be addressed and relationships more equalised. However, in some contexts this would be problematic in relation to statutory interventions in the field of child protection where children are being protected from harm from the adults who are caring for them.

The service user mandate has emerged most strongly in relation to adult service user groups with personalisation, a strengths-based approach where co-production is central. However, within children and family social work the service user mandate has emerged most strongly in relation to looked after children. Focusing on rights, ethical practice and promoting social

change can be linked to arguments made by Barnes (2007) about how equal weight should be given to both a 'justice ethic' and an 'ethic of care' in relation to social work with looked after children and care leavers. These arguments are developed by Holland (2010) who refers to Sevenhuijsen (2000) where it is stated that 'care is both a practical activity and an ethical framework' (p. 1665). Holland (2010) argues that the (feminist) ethic of care has mostly been linked to social work with adults but that this should be broadened to also include social work with looked after children and care leavers. The research undertaken by Holland (2010) where a small sample of case studies of young people in care were analysed showed that the young people were more concerned by relational matters (ethics of care) than the fulfillment of the social workers' statutory duties (the ethic of justice) (p. 1676). Holland (2010) argues that the recent predominant discourse in policy for looked after children and care leavers has been focused on the ethic of justice but argues that alongside this the ethic of care should be prioritised as it offers a dialogue about the centrality of nurturing and caring relationships.

The policy roots of the children's rights movement were traced in section one of this chapter in relation to children in care and young people leaving care. Developments in social work education and the involvement of young people are examined by Boylan et al (2000). In their paper they examine the issue of power and refer to Foucault (1980) arguing that 'the way to understand power is to explore the way it is exercised and experienced from the perception of the subject' (Boylan et al 2000, p. 555). Issues of power are also raised by Molyneux and Irvine (2004) and the challenges in trying to create a partnership model between academics, students and service users. Within the findings of this doctoral study issues of power were also raised by the young people who led the workshops at the university and in the local authority. In the study by Boylan et al (2000) it was found that the skills and confidence of

the young people who had led training had increased and social work students' understanding of issues of power had also deepened. It is argued by Boylan et al (2000) that the process and experience of service user involvement is a way of enabling more critically reflective practice. There were also links made to how this process helps to affirm social work values regarding rights, inclusion and partnership.

In a review of service user involvement in social work education, Waterson and Morris (2005) argue that when social workers, students and service users train together, it offers the opportunity for all to 'see each other's viewpoint and create a two-way interchange in problem solving' (p. 661). They present a summary review of practice guides which could form the bedrock of good practice when working with service users in social work education. The key points are: 'respect and taking each other seriously; communication, openness, ability to enter the other's world and trust; recognition, understanding and valuing commonality and difference; sharing information, power and decision-making and negotiation' (Waterson and Morris 2005, p. 661). They reiterate that service user involvement at all levels is a lengthy and resource intensive process and that it takes time to develop reciprocal, trusting relationships. They comment on the challenges and state that, 'the sheer administrative and organisational task of bring them [service users and students] under one roof at the same time for face to face training should not be underestimated' (Waterson and Morris 2005, p. 670). They go on to argue that 'involving service users in direct training... is all about developing theoretical and conceptual understanding, general values, attitudes and skills' and that when it is successful it encourages holistic understanding. Other evaluations by social work educators (Humphreys 2005) describe an incremental approach and suggest service user involvement in teaching provides a pathway towards good practice rather than 'radical transformation' (p. 802).



Other social work research in this area focuses on problem-based learning in relation to the involvement of service users in social work education (Green and Wilks 2009). They refer to Taylor's (1997) work in relation to adult learning and how a number of key theorists including Schon (1983) and Eraut (1992) (in Green and Wilks 2009) have been influential in the development of problem-based learning. They describe how experience is key and that it acts as the 'fundamental stimulus for learning and thinking' (Green and Wilks 2009, p.191). In their service user teaching they used problem-based learning in group discussions using a practice based scenario. Both students and service users were involved in the group processes. They also worked with a group of young care leavers and used a focus group methodology to elicit young people's views about how service users should be involved in teaching social work students. They stated that their experiences of working with the young care leavers on their social work programme had a major impact on how they integrated service user involvement in their teaching. This resulted in them reviewing their practice of using case studies as 'trigger materials' in problem-based learning during module teaching.

They went on to critique this method, as an approach which had reinforced the power dynamics between worker and client as the case studies in effect told the client's story from a social work perspective and cemented the view of 'clienthood' (Green and Wilks 2005, p.197). They developed a new model of using problem based learning through working with service users as 'consultants'. They argue that their work with service users has been informed by democratic principles and that they have had to review their pedagogical processes to ensure service users' expertise was properly utilised and valued. In a paper by Warren and Boxall (2009) they discuss social exclusion and how they developed a course focused on research and social policy where students and service users came together for

education and training over a number of weeks. They argued that their project gives an example of how service users can be involved as 'learners and producers of knowledge about social exclusion' (p.294). However, links to the curriculum and social work knowledge in practice were not fully explored or examined.

Although there have been controversies and challenges in relation to service user involvement in practice and in education (Beresford 2000; Carr 2004) other publications have demonstrated a more positive impact (Danso et al, 2003, Allain et al 2006). In a review of findings from six literature reviews Carr (2004) evaluates the impact of service user involvement in social work services in relation to whether it promotes change and improvement. Findings showed that monitoring, when it was taking place, in relation to outcomes was limited and that there was a focus on processes rather than on what changes if any had occurred as a result of service user involvement. Other findings demonstrated that individuals, including both older and younger people and children personally benefitted through being involved in participatory events. This was linked in particular to, 'social contact, opportunities for learning and developments and for self-esteem' (Carr, 2004, p8). There were reports of 'substantial evidence that children and young people perceive that they have gained in self-confidence, self-belief, knowledge and skills, education and employment... with accounts of improved peer relations and the development of group skills' (Carr, 2004, p8). This could be linked to the development of social capital. Despite the positives, concerns were also raised in relation to trepidation about power sharing and professional anxiety about the meaning of professional knowledge in this context.

## **Children's rights and service user involvement**

In a review by Oldfield and Fowler (2004) it is argued that the involvement of children and young people as service users has only really developed properly over the last ten years. It is felt that prior to this, adults more often interpreted children's views. However, children and young people in the care system have fought for their voices to be heard and developed campaign organisations including the National Association of Young People in Care and more recently, 'A National Voice,' which is a young person led campaigning organisation for children in care run by care-leavers. The emergence of the children's rights agenda and the development of a new sociology of childhood (James and Prout 1997) were fundamental in increasing understanding of children as having agency and helped to drive forward changes in policy and practice in relation to service user involvement and participatory activities. Models of participation developed by Hart (1992) and by Treseder (1997) present diagrammatic representations about how the participation of children can be plotted. In Hart's 'ladder' the model is on a continuum with 'Rung 1' described as 'manipulation' through to 'Rung 8' which is described as child-initiated decisions with adults. Hart's model informed the process in relation to undertaking participatory action research. I was aware that I was working with young people who had had difficult experiences of adults not caring for them and not always listening to what they wanted and needed so I thought carefully about my approach. On reflection, I started on 'Rung 6' of Hart's model (1992) which is: 'adult-initiated, shared decisions with children/young people' but by the end of the research and throughout planning the final stage I believe 'Rung 8' had been achieved- 'Child/young person initiated- shared decisions with adults'. In Chapter 5 there is further critical analysis of my research findings linked to the use of Hart's ladder.

In Treseder (1997) a non-hierarchical diagram is used to codify and analyse the involvement of children and young people across five different areas. The domains include: being consulted and informed; assigned but informed; adult-initiated shared decisions with children; child initiated and directed and child-initiated, shared decisions with adults.

Policy documents and practice guides in social work exhort local authorities and their staff plus social work educators to ensure service user involvement is a central part of ensuring services and the curriculum remain informed and shaped by people's experiences. However, concerns have been expressed about how the outcomes of service user involvement and participation are evaluated (Ackermann et al, 2003). The danger is that service user involvement can be seen purely as a 'good thing' which may lead to tokenistic approaches leaving young people who are involved in participation activities becoming disillusioned. Issues of confidence and capability are discussed by Warren (2007) and how it is important that participatory activities are carefully planned as some children and young people may have very little experience of speaking out or may feel inhibited due to previous experiences of being misrepresented or misunderstood. Marchant and Kirby (2004) discuss the importance of relationships with researchers or professionals as part of the process and that this takes time and commitment.

Kirby, et al, (2003) in research findings from twenty-nine organisations highlighted the importance of organisational commitment across all levels of the hierarchy to embedding the participation activity of young people in existing structures. Research from Gunn (2008) focused on young people's participation across three English local authorities and involved 24 semi-structured interviews with young people, staff and managers plus local politicians. It was found that participation was enhanced if the organisational culture was positive; if the

right sort of mechanisms and systems were in place and if there was a clear understanding of issues of power and the impact of this on the young people in the participatory process (Gunn, 2008, p253).

### **Transformational learning and professional education**

The concepts of transformational learning and critical reflection are used in this doctoral study as a tool to discuss and analyse the impact of the training workshops which were delivered by care leavers to social work students and social workers. This involves an exploration of constructions of power and the meaning of 'clienthood' (Green and Wilks 2009, p.197) in this context. Transformational learning is described as 'learning that takes learners' knowledge and skills into a different or new domain'...which is 'unsettling in that it leads to questioning of accepted assumptions' (McEwen 2009, p.1) Transformational learning theory is used in adult learning and was developed by Mezirow (1978;1997) who discussed how it is a learning process which involves 'becoming critically aware of one's own tacit assumptions and expectations and those of others' (Mezirow 2000, cited by McEwen 2009, p2). Other authors offer a range of definitions, for example, Jones (2009) in discussing Mezirow (2003) refers to how Mezirow draws on Habermas' theoretical ideas about learning leading to change. The process is defined as:

*...learning that transforms problematic frames of reference-sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets)-to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change. Such frames of reference are better than others because they are more likely to generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action (Mezirow 2003, pp58-59 cited by Jones 2009, p.10)*

This quote articulates the empowerment and emancipatory aspects of transformational learning which are congruent with aspects of social work values and the concepts of social justice and equality. In a discussion about how critical reflection triggers transformational learning, Mezirow (1990) gives the example of the women's movement and how they challenged long-held assumptions about the stereotypical roles ascribed to them. He relates this to primary socialization in childhood and how 'meaning perspectives are ...uncritically acquired in childhood, often in the context of an emotionally charged relationship with parents (p.3). He argues that adulthood is the time to re-assess previously held assumptions and that this process is facilitated through education and the opportunity to reflect with others.

In a critical review of the empirical research into transformational learning (Taylor 2007) it was identified that there is an emerging trend for the use of action research methods linked to transformative learning. In addition, the research review found that in a number of studies a key issue was making relationships with others. A key part of the process was enabling individuals to learn in a trusting environment with open dialogue focusing on questioning, discussions and information sharing which created shared understanding. This was identified as 'transformative relationships' (Taylor 2007, p.179). The review found that one of the most effective ways of fostering transformative learning is 'providing students with learning experiences that are direct, personally engaging and stimulate reflection upon experience' (Taylor 2007, p.182). The studies they referred to which were particularly powerful were in relation to medical students and nurses having direct contact with services and patients through visiting hospitals, hospices and funeral homes. One example given was in relation to students spending time with a patient and their family having palliative care.

This approach to learning has been used in pedagogical methods in social work education especially in relation to critical reflection which is described as the first phase in the transformational learning journey (Merriam and Caffarella 1999). Models of critical reflection in social work education and practice have emerged from critical theory and Schon's reflective practice framework (1983, 1987). The work of Fook (2002; 2004); Fook and Gardner 2007 and Fook and Askeland (2007) are primarily associated with developing this method in contemporary social work education.

Fook and Gardner (2007) identify four theoretical approaches which underpin their critical reflective model. The first is Schon's (1987) model of reflective practice; the second is the concept of reflexivity with its roots in social and anthropological research defined by Steier (1991 cited by Fook and Gardner 2007, p27) as 'a turning back on itself'. The third is postmodernism and deconstruction which links to problem-based learning and finally, critical social theory. They go on to identify five strands of critical social theory which they use in their model: issues of power; of domination; social change; knowledge, being both constructed and empirical and the importance of communication and dialogue (Fook and Gardner, 2007, p.35). The model they use is described as one where there are small groups of critically reflective learners.

To facilitate the process of criticality, small student group discussions are used to analyse critical incidents from practice placements. It is claimed that this technique inspires deep learning with an accompanying transformative element. Critical theorists in social work education argue that this enables students to move beyond being merely reflective. It is stated that this approach to learning has the potential to transform assumptions and long-held beliefs although it could be argued that all learning offers this potential.

The application of transformational learning and critical reflection in relation to social work students is examined by Bay and Macfarlane (2011) and by Fook and Askeland (2007). The former paper, which I discuss firstly, uses student case studies from social work placements in order that the students can critically reflect on their practice. The authors use a final year module from the Australian social work degree as a case study. The authors discuss how their method of teaching critical reflection links directly with transformational learning theory. They argue that using critical reflection enabled students 'to problematise their taken-for-granted lived experience, to reconceptualise identity categories, disrupt assumed causal relations and to reflect on how power relations are operating' (Bay and Macfarlane 2011, p745). Their pedagogical approach draws on Fook's (2002; 2004) work. They refer to Mezirow (1997) who states that 'transformational learning develops autonomous thinking through challenging points of view and habitual ways of thinking' (cited by Bay and Macfarlane 2011, p747). The authors also use Foucauldian ideas about power relations and identity categorisations to help students develop a critical perspective. They also draw on Foucault's theorisations about governmentality and how identity categories are developed, for example 'disabled adult' and how 'subject positions' (Bay and Macfarlane 2011, p751) can become fixed, resulting in labelling which social workers may use as part of categorization which could result in service users feeling stuck in a category or with a label. They argue that through helping students become more aware of their current assumptions and beliefs they engage in the process of transformational learning. In their case-study this involved a process of students being 'encouraged not to look for differences, but for the processes that create the specified differentiation' (Bay and Macfarlane 2011, p751). This they argued leads to more emancipatory and inclusive practice.



It is argued by Fook and Askeland (2007) that issues of power are central to their approach: thus they claim that it is the '*critical*' part of reflecting that enables transformative learning to take place. Their overarching aim is to improve professional practice which was also my aim in involving care leavers in social work teaching workshops with students. Fook and Askeland (2007) describe how the students who participate act as 'peer reflectors, assisting each other to critically reflect using a set of guidelines and questions designed to help unearth more deeply held assumptions' (p.3). They link this to promoting cultural challenge which involves deconstructing beliefs and assumptions about individuals and society. In addition, they discuss the processes involved in challenging entrenched professional practices and assumptions within organisations and teams. They claim that their method offers a way of examining pre-conceived ideas which facilitates participants' understanding of themselves and others which is central to developing a social work professional identity.

They examine the power of shared professional cultures or beliefs; for example about the experiences, strengths and capabilities of service users and how this professional culture may also be shared by others in the profession or by a particular workplace. They state that their approach to critical reflection inverts this through examining 'the preconceived ideas which are embedded in practices' (Fook and Askeland 2007, p.3). They identify three main cultures they believe are most likely to be present in social work education and practice settings. They are: 'cultural norms regarding interpersonal relating; professional helping cultures and workplace culture; and finally, knowledge and learning culture' (Fook and Askeland 2007, p.4).

I will now specifically examine the issues in relation to professional helping and workplace cultures plus knowledge and learning culture as they are the most relevant to service user

involvement in teaching social work students and transformational learning. Within the authors' discussion about professional helping and workplace cultures they identify six different aspects of professional and /or professional cultures which they argue are most challenged by the critical reflection process and transformational learning. Out of the six identified, it is the one focused on: *'Assumptions Relating to the Construction of 'Client' Identity'* which is most germane to this Doctoral study. The article discusses how practitioners from the helping professions who invariably most often work with vulnerable and disadvantaged people; have values rooted in social justice with a therapeutic orientation. They argue that although this may be positive the flip side can be that professional social workers may construct labels or identities for service users that unwittingly cast them as 'victims' (Moffat, 1999 in Fook and Askeland 2007, p.6). It is argued that the labels assigned to service users may also be underpinned by assumptions that they are:

*relatively powerless, have rights to assistance, and perhaps have difficult or anti-social behavior tolerated because of their disadvantaged position and yet, should be treated as equals and empowered (p.6).*

The authors go on to argue that these assumptions are also underpinned by professional ethical codes and official documents. These assumptions are said to have a significant impact on student learning and may not be fully examined in the course of more theoretical and didactic teaching; whereas as part of critical reflection group teaching, assumptions can be challenged and explored. The issue of small group teaching and feedback is examined in relation to the experiences of care leavers in this study in chapter five. The point about critical reflective teaching and more traditional theoretical knowledge and the processes by which it is derived is also examined by Fook and Askeland (2007). They argue that their model of critical reflection is predicated on assumptions about what constitutes legitimate knowledge and how different knowledge is obtained. They refer to traditional hierarchies of

knowledge and the value placed on empirically based, scientific or technical knowledge based on rational thought being the most highly regarded. They claim that their approach to critical reflection uses the collective knowledge of individuals and that 'knowledge is at least partly created by people' (Fook and Askeland 2007, p.7). They refer to the emotional aspect of their model and how it is a key part of transformational learning as there is promotion of empathy and a deepening understanding of the position of others in society. They argue that their model transforms practice through the experiences of students and their exposure to an approach which promotes social change. Focusing on ethical practice and promoting social change can be linked to arguments made by Barnes (2007) about not only giving credence to a justice ethic in relation to working with looked after young people and care leavers but to also include an ethic of care (Holland 2010).

In summary, transformational learning opportunities and the use of critical reflection act as powerful tools to equip students with the skills and knowledge they need for working in practice. Professional regulators and employers have highlighted the importance of students being able to critically reflect and question key issues in order to develop the ability to engage in critical social analysis. Using the concept of critical reflection with discussion groups creates greater self-awareness and facilitates thinking about the complex dilemmas social workers encounter in practice. It means developing the ability to see the issue or problem from a range of different viewpoints and requires reflection on long-held assumptions and beliefs. Fook and Gardner (2007) summarise the benefits of this pedagogical approach as one where there is greater integration of the personal and professional which results in more holistic and client-centered relationships with service users. Theories of adult learning interwoven with service user care involvement in social work education provide a basis for building more creative approaches to service user involvement in social work

education. Creating space on the curriculum for critical reflection with service users provides a platform for transformative practice and learning for all stakeholders. It can result in mutual exchange and enhance understanding of complex issues and themes in professional social work education. Whilst there are limitations to using critical theory as it can be argued that it does not always link to transformational learning (Fook and Gardner 2007) the theoretical ideas provided a helpful framework in the overall design of this project and in the analysis of the findings of this doctoral study.

The literature reviewed in this chapter and the policy and legislative framework in relation to leaving care links directly to the empirical work undertaken. In section two, through exploring the literature in relation to transitions in social work practice for care leavers and the importance of building social capital for young people, links are made with the project's aims, overarching research aims and research questions. This aspect of the literature review explores and explains the habitus, history and journeys of the young people. This is then developed further in the literature reviewed as part of section three where the focus is on the role of service users as 'experts by experience' in social work education and how this connects with transformational learning. This relates back to the research and project aims and research question and the aim of exploring how students learn about social work practice and how young people who have been through the care system can contribute to their learning.

## **Chapter 3- Methodology and Research Methods**

### **Introduction**

This chapter builds on the discussion emanating from the literature review and from the overall analysis of the theoretical concepts informing this doctoral study. There is a presentation of the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of the study linked to the approach taken to the research methods and research strategy with an explanation for using a multi-methods research design. Overall the study was underpinned by an interpretive research methodology using participatory, action research which fitted with undertaking work-based research. This links also to my career history and experiences as a professional social worker which shaped my ontological position and epistemological approach to this doctoral study. Through the years of research, reading, thinking and analysis I have understood more deeply my commitment to action research; both from a research design perspective, as using this approach fitted my research questions but also in terms of subjectivity. It meant that the notion of there being an objective truth was discarded and as an action researcher I embraced my subjectivity. Undertaking this research has deepened my understanding of my ontology- what I hold to be true and how I see the world. This includes my beliefs about how knowledge is created and shared and how knowledge can be discovered.

Whilst this doctoral study mainly involved gathering qualitative data, quantitative data was gathered in the initial stages to give descriptive, cross-sectional details and biographical information about the circumstances and characteristics of the young people. These quantitative results are explained in the findings chapter. I also describe the methods and research approaches I used to gather my data. Using a participatory action-research approach

was chosen as it linked with my aims ‘to bring theory, method and practice together as people work collaboratively towards practical outcomes and new forms of understanding’ (Frisby, Maguire and Reid, 2009, p14).

In this chapter I discuss the epistemological challenges I experienced due to undertaking a work-based research study where I not only had to consider methodological and epistemological issues but also the organisational contexts I worked within, which at the time of gathering the data, was as a joint appointment across two organisations. Work-based research is embedded in complex organisational contexts where there are competing priorities, a range of different agendas, power relations and the need to work within hierarchies. There was a need for me, as a work-based insider researcher, to be able to manage these bureaucratic and institutional issues plus negotiate a new role as an insider-researcher. Alongside this it was important to maintain positive relationships and continue to complete my ‘normal’ work duties. My journey as a worker-researcher is also explained and discussed in the next chapter where I discuss project activity.

A key issue was examining and reflecting on my own research positionality. This concept has emerged from researchers writing from a feminist perspective (England, 1994; Hopkins, 2007; Sultana, 2007). Positionality is described as focusing on:

*key ethical questions that face researchers conducting fieldwork, especially with regard to the relationship between the researcher and those being researched* (England, 1994, p80).

Reflecting on my own positionality, involved me examining why I focused on this topic; what the ethical issues were and how my approach, professional identity, ethnicity, gender and differences between myself and the young people were seen by them. How their views of me shaped the data I gathered and why undertaking participative action research was so important to me. I had a very different history to the young people involved in my Project; many of whom are from black or minority ethnic communities and had been in the care system whereas I am a white Scottish woman who grew up as part of a family. My influences in relation to my research focus relate back to where I started my career in social work working in a children's home with children in care between the ages of 5 and 18 years old which inspired me to become a qualified social worker. My first experiences of working directly with children and young people living in a children's home have stayed with me and had a lasting impact on my professional career in terms of my commitment to child welfare. This also influenced my choice of research methods which are connected with participative action research. I wanted my doctoral project to directly involve young people in a meaningful way and I did this through participatory action research and through taking time to build trusting, respectful relationships. Similarly to research undertaken by Hughes (2012) with social work students, I was also committed to sharing power with my research participants, the young people.

### **Methodology: ontology and epistemology**

The methodology, research methods, epistemology and underlying theory were informed by my own subjectivist quest to elucidate meanings about the experiences of the research participants through using an inductive approach. The research design and epistemological approach were informed by the following: by social work practice issues; by phenomenology;

by the theory of social capital and also by Foucauldian critical theory ideas regarding power relations and identity categorisations linked to transformational learning. My overall aim was to produce arguments which would explain the position of care leavers as both service users and as 'experts by experience'. Selecting mixed methods with the main focus on an interpretive research paradigm was chosen as I sought to understand social phenomena, not from an outside position but from inside or close to the participants.

The social researcher enters the everyday social world in order to grasp the socially constructed meanings, and then reconstructs these meanings in social scientific language (Blaikie 1993, p96).

Using semi-structured interviews with the young people, students and social workers plus focus groups with the young people afforded the opportunity for sensitive exploration of potentially difficult issues. The intellectual tradition of phenomenology influenced my epistemological objectives as it is 'a philosophy ...concerned with the question of how individuals make sense of the world around them' (Bryman 2012, p14). Bogdan and Taylor (1975) (in Bryman, 2012) describe how, 'The phenomenologist views human behaviour... as a product of how people interpret the world'...(p14). It is an approach aligned to interpretivism developed by Husserl who 'wished to establish truth independently of what people... happen to think it is' (Blaikie, 1993, p33). Phenomenology emerged from social science disciplines and challenges the use of a purely positivist approach as the only way of obtaining an objective truth. The approach focuses on a subjectivist paradigm where there is a more rounded and holistic view of social reality. In using phenomenology, Bryman (2012) describes the importance of the researcher being able to 'bracket out preconceptions in his or her grasp of that world' (p. 14). Using a phenomenological approach gave me a way of managing the research process and the data analysis so that I was able to 'bracket out' some of my own professional identity issues gained



from working with children and young people as a social worker for a number of years. I therefore aimed to try and stand back and critically review and analyse what I found whilst acknowledging my position as an insider - researcher with a social work professional identity.

The phenomenological approach is one where there is a focus on context and interpretation, on how people communicate and in this study; this was used to examine the relationships between the professionals and the care leavers and the societal and professional structures surrounding them. A consideration of conversations and context was important for my study in order to deepen understanding of the specific context of the young people and their positioning as users of services and ‘experts by experience’. In undertaking a constructivist approach I aimed to be accountable, systematic and rigorous in terms of the research methods decisions I took (Mason, 2002, p7). Not relying entirely on positivist, experimental methods meant that this study, although not replicable, was aimed at ensuring the research outcomes could be generalized and may ‘have some demonstrable wider resonance’ (Mason, 2002, p8). Reconciling the demands of the research meant trying to maintain a grasp on the diversity of viewpoints from the young people, from the students and the social workers which in turn linked to the broader social work curriculum agenda and needs of employers both of which were evolving and changing throughout the period of the research. These approaches to inquiry were embedded in the project and research aims of the study which are reiterated below and followed by my research questions:

**Project aims:**

- To deepen social workers’ and social work students’ understandings of the needs of young people leaving care;

- To support young people who had been in care (and were receiving a service from the local authority's leaving care team) to develop and deliver training and teaching workshops to qualified social workers and social work students;
- To improve social work education and practice.

### **Overarching Research Aims**

- To explore how young people who have been through the care system can contribute to teaching social work students and qualified social workers through sharing their own experiences.
- To contribute to the debate about critically reflective social work practice with young people leaving care.
- To explore how students and social workers learn about social work practice.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the views of young care leavers about the services they receive as part of the Children (Leaving Care Act) 2000?
2. How can the involvement of care leavers in delivering training, influence social workers' and students' practice?
3. What were the main messages identified by the young people, social workers and students following attendance at training workshops delivered by young care leavers?
4. How can involvement in delivering this training influence care leavers' social and economic capital?

In trying to answer the research questions and to facilitate understanding my aim was to generate data that could be analysed and triangulated drawing on the research participants'

different perspectives. This included the views of the young people who were care leavers, alongside the views of social work students and qualified social workers. The project study design and research methods were driven both by the requirements of the Doctorate in Professional Studies and the learning outcomes of the project module DPS 5260 and also by my attempts to understand the social reality of care leavers and their experiences of social work. Secondly, I wanted to find out how their position as 'clients' or service users could be channelled into teaching social workers and students. The topic could have used alternative research methods to gather data, including a larger amount of quantitative data using a positivist empirical approach. However, I was interested in gathering data from a subjectivist and constructivist paradigm as the areas being studied was both being produced by the research participants themselves and was being constantly revised through social interaction (Bryman, 2012, p18).

Using phenomenology as an approach was underpinned by using critically reflective theoretical approaches to practice which link to examining issues of power, professional knowledge and identifying 'deep-seated assumptions' (Fook and Askeland 2007, p2). Critical theory methods in social work have been applied in practice through the development of radical, structural and feminist approaches to practice which emerged from the 1960s (Fook, 2012, p5). These emancipatory approaches involve analysis of structural socio-economic issues with avoidance of blaming individuals for problems they may encounter in life (Fook, 2012, p5). Overall, the focus is on critical reflection and of questioning the claims to professional knowledge. These are key issues in social work research and practice as having knowledge is seen as a route to also holding power (Foucault, 1980). As service users were a key part of this research, this approach offered a way of analysing issues of power and whose voices are heard and viewed as important in social work discourse and whether service

users' knowledge is accepted as being of value in developing the social work profession and curriculum.

Using Foucauldian ideas in social work research and as part of the social work curriculum has been developed by Fook 2002; 2004; Fook and Gardner 2007; Fook and Askeland 2007. Fook (2012) discusses the practical uses of critical approaches to practice and how the roots of this approach can be traced back to post-structuralist social theorists including Foucault, Derrida and Lacan (p13). Fook (2012) describes the evolution of poststructuralist thinking and its emergence out of post-modernism where there was a rejection of 'totalising theories and structures' (Fook, 2012, p12). Post-structuralists argue that language, discourse and their meanings should be interpreted alongside the specific context within which they take place as only then can the issues be properly examined and understood (Fook, 2012, p13). This approach gave me a framework for my research which focused on a workplace context with a specific group of young people who had received social work services. This approach linked correspondingly to my use of action research methods which are also viewed as having 'emancipatory potential' within social research (Robson, 2011, p41). Critical approaches are concerned with how political, social and economic forces shape the experiences, structure and priorities of institutions and individuals which links to issues of power. Critical theory within social work is an approach that questions established norms and structures and seeks to understand relations between the roles and identity of those who are part of the structure being studied and analysed. Taking this paradigm facilitates understanding of where people are positioned in the social or institutional hierarchy and therefore lends itself to critically analysing the position of care leavers and the role and position they held in the context of this study.

## Reflexivity

Adopting a reflexive approach fits with the values of the social work profession where there is a focus on self-reflection in practice and on attempting to understand and empathise with service users which also involves adhering to a code of professional values and ethics (Health and Care Professions Council, 2012). Reflexivity was an important aspect of my study as it involved participative action research where there was close collaboration with research participants in designing the research process and in gathering the data. Action-research is described by Carr and Kemmis (1986, p162) as:

A form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants...in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out.

Fook discusses the links between reflexivity and action research design and argues that it creates the opportunity 'to co-construct a narrative which 'works' for the service user within a professional culture' (Fook, 2012, p146). Issues of social or professional identity and how they impact on the research process is discussed by Robson (2011, p.172). Being reflexive is of primary importance in work-based practitioner research and for me was a key task in terms of my position as an insider-researcher. I was aware of the need to maintain boundaries in my role as a researcher and yet to also acknowledge my professional identity as a social worker. My focus was therefore on *reflexive* research practice as opposed to *reflective* social work practice. This became challenging at times as it felt I was moving between these positions especially in relation to my approach which was informed by a participative action research approach. To assist me in this task I documented the different stages of my research and remained alert to how my insider knowledge could both be a help and a hindrance throughout

the research process. My position as part of this study was shaped by being an insider researcher in both research sites and as part of this I was mindful of the need to maintain a critically reflective position although I was also a 'worker'. In gathering and analysing the data and in making claims about possible meaning and findings, issues of my insider status and research positionality are considered in relation to the findings. This has meant being reflexive across a number of areas including a 'focus on the research process, relationships, and the claims made for the data, ...claims of 'authenticity' and the process of knowledge production' (Cullen et al, 2012, p14).

Being an insider researcher had a number of effects on the research process and outcomes, particularly in relation to my role within the local authority which changed over the time-period I was working on my doctorate. One of the effects on the research process was the need for frequent negotiations with the gatekeepers about the data I wanted to gather, when I wanted to do this and how it should be gathered. In the university, this was reasonably straightforward and easy to negotiate but in the local authority, I had to adapt my research strategy and methods so that they fitted with some of the children's services' aims. Managers were keen to show how the participation of young people was impacting positively on service developments but found it difficult to accept that not all of the feedback young people might give would be positive. There were discussions with senior managers about whether there needed to be further quantitative surveys involving the young people. The gathering of data using this method was a favoured approach for managers as they felt it could be easily presented and summarised. However, as I was interested in exploring the experiences of the young people directly, I argued that undertaking focus groups and semi-structured interviews would give greater depth of information about their experiences. This links to my epistemological position and use of a largely interpretivist approach where my focus was on

understanding the experiences of the young people (Bryman, 2012). The outcomes of my doctorate would have been different if I had not used focus groups and semi-structured interviews as there would not have been the strong voice of the young people which is a value important to me and one I have held onto throughout this research. My research design and methods was accepted by managers, although I had to add additional questions to my questionnaire in accordance with managers' wishes. This impacted on some of the overall findings about service provision, including the role of housing support and home visits. Overall, the effects on the research process of being an insider researcher were shifting and myriad and required a greater amount of time than I anticipated. I frequently had to justify my research aims, values, strategy and epistemology and I was often concerned that failing to do this would impact negatively on my research. My position in both organisations, influenced the formulation of some of the data collection methods used, including questions asked, although in terms of interpreting the data and the analysis and presentation of the findings, I maintained greater control. However, being an insider research also had an effect on my outcomes which can be linked to the reflexive approach I adopted towards interpreting the data produced. This is described by Mason as one where: 'a reflexive reading will locate you as part of the data you have generated, and will seek to explore your role and perspective in the process of generation and interpretation (Mason, 2002, p149). My contact and interactions with the young people had an impact on my outcomes, which can be seen in my overall discussion of findings. In addition, my role as a social worker and previous experiences also impacted on the process and outcomes. This is discussed within the discussion of overall findings in Chapter 5.

There were constraints to being an insider researcher and I had not foreseen them all.

Throughout the period of undertaking my doctorate, I reflected a great deal on the impact of

my own values and biases as a professional social worker and an academic plus the social context within which my research was being conducted. This aspect of reflexivity is referred to as showing the researcher's 'location in time and social space' (Bryman, 2012, p393). In my case, this shifted and changed over the period of doctoral study and is reflected in the findings discussed in Chapter 5 and in the conclusions in Chapter 7.

## **Research design**

The study design had to adhere to the specific requirements of the work-based doctorate where the final *thesis* is called a *project* and is linked to a module with specific (module) Project learning outcomes and aims (DPS 5260). In addition, the research methods used for data collection had to also be capable of answering the overarching research questions. Integrating these two dimensions was a complex task. In essence, I was required to research my own professional practice through undertaking a project within the remit of my normal employment within my areas of responsibility. This meant researching a work based or professional problem that I was grappling with but also meant undertaking 'a work project' within my role to change an aspect of practice and improve it. Throughout the research, changes to social work education and the policy and practices regarding care leavers did shift and change but not to the extent that required radical changes to the research strategy. The final piece of the research strategy and design shows how I made changes and demonstrates evidence of achievement and specific outcomes. The 'Project Activity' chapter outlines what I did and when and charts the timeline for this study.



## **Action Research**

Action research is used most often as an approach in educational, social welfare and community based research and has been described as ‘amenable to practice-orientated contexts’ (Cullen, Bradford and Green, 2012, p15). The origins of action research highlight how it was used first by Lewin (1946) as a method of understanding organisations so that change could take place. I adapted the cyclical action research process of Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998, p21) and of Mc Niff and Whitehead (2009, p15). However, the approach I took had to fit with the requirements of both the workplaces my research took place within so compromises and changes were necessary. The focus on creating collaborative change also coheres agreeably with work-based research. Robson (2011) describes how the purpose of action research is primarily to ‘influence or change some aspect of whatever is the focus of the research’ (p.188). In my doctoral study, participatory action research approaches were used to influence and change social work education and training across a university curriculum and the training of social workers in a local authority through working collaboratively with young people who have experience of being in the care system.

A key feature of action research is that the researcher collaborates with the research subjects who are the focus of the research. I used a participatory action research approach for some aspects of my study but due to the requirements of my academic programme it was not feasible for the young people to be involved in all aspects of the research process. Action research is participatory by its very nature and Mc Niff (2013) presents a range of case studies with examples of its application. One of the key areas where action research has been developed is in the field of education with collaboration between teachers and researchers

often referred to (Frankham and Howes, 2006; Robson, 2011). In this study the collaboration was with young people who had been 'in care'.

The action research cycle involves planning a change, acting and then observing what happens following the change, reflecting on these processes, planning further action and then repeating the cycle. Data gathered as part of the process of change should be analysed as this informs any further actions. In simple terms, action research is described as taking action, doing research and then telling the story and sharing findings about what has been done and why it is of importance (Mc Niff and Whitehead 2009, p11). A key tenet of action research is making claims for improvement, which is fully discussed and analysed in my findings chapter. The challenges and issues regarding the reporting of evidence and the claims for improvement that may be made when action research has been undertaken are discussed by (Mc Niff and Whitehead 2009, p15). They argue that action researchers may encounter problems when moving from describing the alleged improvements to practice to actually providing evidence and a robust action research methodology showing that the correct steps were taken. They discuss how the following steps should be used in action-research:

- Identification of the research issue which is how to improve practice
- Formulation of a research question
- Gathering data to show the current situation
- Taking action to improve the situation
- Monitoring actions and gathering more data to show the situation as it develops
- Generating evidence from the data
- Articulating the significance of what I was undertaking in relation to the researcher's learning and the learning of others

- Modifying ideas and own practice in light of evaluation of the evidence gathered

(Mc Niff and Whitehead 2009, p15)

In my study, the above approach provided a useful guide for conducting the research although I made minor amendments to the model to fit with my action-research study. In the following section I outline a key stage of the research process which was working with the young people to prepare them for the delivery of the training.

### **Application of action research: training with the young people**

Participatory and collaborative models of research in social work with service users and their involvement in training is discussed in a special edition of *Social Work Education* (2006, vol. 25, no.4.). In my doctoral study in order that the young people who were involved in the research could actually teach or train the students and social workers it was necessary for them as a group to receive training about how to do this. This took place after the survey questionnaires and focus groups were completed with the young people recruited from the focus groups. The local authority paid for this training and I joined the young people in the training sessions which were called, ‘Total Respect’ and were developed by an organisation called ‘Children’s Rights Officers and Advocates (CROA, 2006). The ethos of the ‘Total Respect’ training programme is that professionals and young people should work together as trainers. This means that the training programme for the prospective trainers has to commence with honest discussions about what co-working means, what the issues of power are and how will the group respond to them. There are key exercises and scenarios which are practised and discussed over the three days of training, which was facilitated by a CROA trainer. Seven young people attended the ‘Total Respect’ training and three young people

then went on to deliver the training workshops to students and social workers focused on how to communicate with young people.

## **Research methods**

Research methods used in any study must be fit for purpose and facilitate the collection and analysis of data which in turn will lead to answering the research questions originally posed. In this doctoral study I had the added complexity of trying to reconcile the multiple demands of undertaking a work-based doctorate. I used a five-stage approach using qualitative research methods informed by an initial questionnaire and an action –research approach. The following steps were taken:

1. A basic survey questionnaire was used to gather biographical data
2. Two focus groups of care leavers from one local authority drawn from a sample of young people who completed the survey questionnaire
3. Training with the young people using the ‘Total Respect’ model so that they could deliver training to social workers and students. The group of young people were drawn from the focus group research participants.
4. Delivery of training workshops to students and social workers
5. Semi-structured interviews with the young people, social workers and students who had experienced the training workshops.

## **Stages of the research process**

Gathering biographical data about the overall cohort of local authority care leavers gave an important overview and helped me to frame my research strategy and future research questions. A staged approach to the research meant that some young people who had participated in the questionnaire then consented to take part in the two focus groups of young people. The third stage of the project involved co-training with some of the young people who had taken part in the focus group on a programme called 'Total Respect Training'. This programme focuses on empowering young people to enable them to train and be involved in work with professionals: the aim being to create greater understanding between young care leavers, who have experienced social work services, and professionals who deliver social work services.

This aspect of the study draws on a participatory action research approach. The fourth stage of the research process was recruiting four young people from the Total Respect Training who agreed to deliver training workshops focused on communicating with young people to social work students at the University and social workers from the local authority. The fifth and final stage of the project was gathering data through semi-structured interviews with three care leavers who had delivered the training, three students who had taken part in a workshop delivered by the young people at university and four social workers who had taken part in the training in the local authority.

## **Sampling**

My approach to sampling and selection gave me a cohort of research participants with direct experience of my area of enquiry. Using a purposeful sampling approach (Silverman, 2010)

enabled me to recruit research participants for each stage of the study. This is discussed by Bryman (2012) and is identified as an approach used in mixed methods research ‘when the findings from a survey might be used as the basis for the selection of a purposive sample’ (p422). Out of the fifty young people who returned a questionnaire eleven young people agreed to participate in a focus group discussion with seven of the young people then taking part in the ‘Total Respect’ training. Whilst it was reasonably straightforward to recruit students and qualified social workers, this was more problematic in relation to the young people some of whom had negative views about social workers. This became clear and evident in the focus groups where some young people recounted feeling let down by their social workers and by what they called ‘the system’ or ‘people who work for the council’. Although this study was successful in obtaining extremely rich qualitative accounts from a number of willing young people, ‘it needs to be recognized that attempting to elicit the views of a vulnerable and highly mobile population can be extremely challenging’ (Barn, 2010 p.838). In addition, there was an element of self-selection in relation to the sample which in turn influences the findings. Some young people said they wanted to be part of the research to raise issues they were concerned about and some said they wanted to be part of making a change. However, I do not have information about the young people who did not participate. Having a larger sample of returned questionnaires compared to numbers involved in the focus groups and semi-structured interviews with the young people means that I am able to triangulate and analyse data from each stage and make theoretical links in relation to the discussion of findings in Chapter 5.

It was important that I remained reflexive and responsive as a researcher which at times was challenging. Cousins and Milner (2007) write about the issue of children’s rights and children and young people being represented as a group in social work research. They argue

that awareness of inequality ‘has to inform every stage of the process, from the initial conception of the issues and framing of the questions, through the process of gaining access and consent, to the strategies involved in the interview setting’ (p.448). They discuss the importance of securing the right environment for the research setting and refer to using a participatory approach as part of the research process (Thomas and O’ Kane 1998 in Cousins and Milner, 2007). They also suggest that self-completion questionnaires are a helpful approach as they give freedom and anonymity and that semi-structured interviews ‘can yield high quality data’ (Cousins and Milner 2007, p. 454). These methods have been used in this mixed methodology research project.

### **Approach to data analysis**

1. Analysis of biographical data from 50 care leavers from one local authority
2. Qualitative analysis of data from two focus groups of five and six young people who were care leavers from one local authority
3. Qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews from three care leavers, three social work students and four social workers.

### **Quantitative data**

My research used quantitative research to gather mainly biographical data and to facilitate the recruitment and preparation of a group of research participants some of whom became active participants through the training. I used descriptive statistics to describe and summarise the data I had gathered and in my analysis, this enabled me to draw out key themes and patterns. The questions in the survey questionnaire were a combination of closed questions and included use of a Likert rating scale with questions about age and gender. I used this design in my questionnaire structure as it was clear and easy to follow for the research participants.

In reviewing other questionnaire structures including the semantic differential scale (SD scale) I rejected them as not fitting so well with my questions. Using a differential scale would have required a rating scale with bipolar extremes, for example strong/weak with research participants asked to rate each question or concept. This would not have given me the data I need so I decided not to use this scaling technique (Oppenheim, 1992, p236). Questions were also asked about the support the young people received and to what extent they found this helpful in relation to housing, employment and overall support. The questionnaire was developed with managers from the local authority children's social work department with certain questions included as the managers wanted access to information about the use of services. For example, some of the questions regarding the details of which staff the young people saw and whether they used the drop-in or visited the office were added at the request of staff and managers as there were concerns the drop-in and central location of the leaving care team were going to be moved by the council to an inaccessible location. The data was helpful in showing some information about the pattern of services used by the young people. In designing the questionnaire I used the Czaja and Blair (1996) '*Model of the survey data collection process*' (in Robson, 2002, p242). This model emphasizes the importance of linking the research aims to the questionnaire questions. I aimed to incorporate the characteristics of a 'good' questionnaire, described by Robson (2011) as providing: 'valid measures of the research questions; getting the co-operation of respondents, and eliciting accurate information' (p.242). I also consulted with a senior social worker from the team about the questions and refined them following feedback. The survey questionnaires were sent out to two hundred and forty young people who were receiving a service from the leaving care teams (data gathered, July 2007). They were sent out anonymously by the service and each had a number so that if young people agreed to take part in the focus group



they could be personally invited. From this fifty completed survey questionnaires were returned.

### **Approach to data analysis-self-complete survey questionnaires**

This biographical data was analysed through using SPSS to generate percentages and basic statistics regarding the circumstances of the young people. Using quantitative data analysis often means testing hypotheses but this was not the aim as I was trying to get a descriptive picture of the data-set. I used self-report measures in the questionnaire as I wanted to gather self-report descriptive data on this group of young people who are a hard to reach group. I used Likert scales to give an indication of young people's attitudes towards particular issues which included the young people rating the service they were receiving; this was of particular interest to the local authority managers who wanted information about the profile of the young people and their attitude towards services. In accordance with research guidance (Bryman, 2012, p166) I ensured the questions were interrelated and focused on themed areas relating to the service from the organisation.

With some assistance from a research assistant the data was analysed and grouped together and presented as bar charts. I produced descriptive statistics in SPSS, opting for graphs and then chart builder (Appendix 1). Creating bar charts enabled some analysis of the activities and personal circumstances of the young people. There was insufficient data to use cross-tabulation with chi-square tests. Although using cross-tabulations would have offered a way of comparing data I chose not to take this approach as the aim was to describe the circumstances of the young people. Using a survey with a non-experimental design produced 'two –dimensional rows and columns with coding data' (Robson, 2011, p462). Analysis of

this data showed me what sort of services the young people were accessing, whether they were in education or employment, what their plans for the future in relation to this was and whether they were involved and understood their pathway plans. This data, although simple gave me a useful starting point in planning the next stages of the focus groups and semi-structured interviews.

## **Focus Groups**

Following the questionnaires, I planned focus groups which took place in May 2008. The delay was unintended but linked to negotiations in the local authority and also confirming consent and appropriate times for meeting the young people. Two focus groups gathered data from eleven young people with five and six respectively in each group. Linhorst (2002) and Kevern and Webb (2001) discuss how focus groups have become a widely accepted approach to gathering qualitative data in social research. In planning my focus groups, I drew on information from a study by Hyden and Bulow (2003) involving different professionals which gave useful guidance about the approach they took and the methodological challenges they encountered. They discuss the importance of considering how the group represents itself and how its members may shift between speaking as individuals or as a specific group and that this should be considered in the analysis. Morgan (1997) argues that focus groups can be used as the only data in a study or combined with a multi-methods approach which is the approach in my study.

Focus groups are described as a process in which a 'moderator interviews a small group of participants, typically 6 to 10 and uses the group process to stimulate discussion' (Linhorst, 2002, p209). The questions I asked were in relation to the specific issues of being looked

after and then experiencing care leaving services. In terms of the practical arrangements, I was the group facilitator although as stated by Hyden and Bulow (2003) 'it is the participants themselves who must organise their interaction and their reciprocal relationships' (p.310). I ensured the interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed verbatim. I developed a group of questions in line with my research aims although research participants did sometimes divert into discussing other areas so I was required to bring the discussion back on occasions. It was at times challenging to manage the groups and in one group interview, one of the young people brought her toddler which also created a different dimension.

The focus groups I undertook were around a specific theme (Bryman 2012) and focused on the transition to independence from being in care. As part of the process I undertook extensive pre- planning to ensure written consent was obtained and that the timing and location were convenient for the young people. Overall, organising the focus group event and accessing a group of young care leavers was very challenging and took a great deal of time as it involved the gatekeeper and young people who had busy lives with many priorities. The local authority leaving care staff facilitated my focus groups by helping me to time them to run just before an early evening group work session where pizza and fruit juice was served. In the focus groups the young people responded to each other's views, listened to each other and engaged in conversations. Sometimes the young people talked over and interrupted each other, gave partial answers and finished each other's sentences perhaps because in places there was close identification with what other people were saying and had experienced. I gained rich sources of data although the process was intensive and time-consuming. My aim was to not only capture individual views but to also 'study the processes whereby meaning is collectively constructed' (Bryman, 2001, p339). This was a feature of both focus groups and emerged through data analysis, this is referred to as 'establishing a common communicative

ground' (Hyden and Bulow 2003, p311). This was especially with regards to some of the group who had permanent British citizenship (mostly in Group B) compared to the young people who were unaccompanied asylum seekers and who were still seeking security as British citizens (mostly in Group A).

### **Approach to data analysis –focus groups**

As there were two focus groups, to identify them I named the focus group with five young people- Group A and the focus group with six young people- Group B. The young people were randomly allocated by the gatekeepers to the groups although there were more unaccompanied asylum seeking young people in Group A than in Group B and this gave different results to questions in the groups. The data from the focus groups was analysed by careful reading and scrutiny to identify key issues including events, practices, experiences and the meanings attached to them. The key issues I identified were then grouped together. I followed Robson's (2001, p476) phases of thematic coding analysis and gave each issue/ theme a code which was a word/s. This is described as analytic coding 'that comes from interpretation and reflection on meaning' (Richards, 2009, p102). The codes were then grouped into smaller sets of generalisations and in this way the data was 'boiled down' and reduced. Through this process I was able to identify themes including main themes and sub-themes. Using the techniques outlined by Ryan and Bernard (2003, p89) I identified themes included the use of repetitions, categories or words used themselves by the research participants plus their use of linguistic connector words. This led to the creation of thematic groupings and facilitated analysis and the comparison of findings.

## **Semi-structured interviews**

Following on from the focus groups I conducted semi-structured interviews with social workers, young people who were care leavers and student social workers. There was a gap of nine months between the focus groups and the semi-structured interviews as I had to recruit young people from the focus groups to deliver training workshops to social workers and students in the academic year 2008/2009. I recruited three young people and prior to delivering the workshops we would meet to plan the sessions and agree arrangements about where to meet and timings. Holding the focus groups first, helped me to clarify the issues and questions I wanted to focus on (Silverman 2010). The interviews with the young people and the students and social workers were conducted using open-ended, semi-structured questions to facilitate conversational dialogue. I encouraged respondents to reflect and respond through prompts and non-verbal cues including nodding and open body language.

## **Approach to data analysis – Semi-structured interviews**

The approach to data analysis used was similar to that used in the focus groups to enable patterns and themes to emerge. I again combed the data thoroughly, reading and re-reading to identify key words, activities, practices and experiences (Robson, 2011; Richards, 2009). Analytic coding was used creating categories across the three different groups of people I interviewed; students, young people and social workers. The overarching analysis involved comparing responses and codes across the three groups. Interviews were recorded on a digital tape recorder and I also took rough notes to aid my analysis. In presenting the findings there are some distinct areas related to the views of the young people although findings from all three groups of research participants are reported together.

## **Ethics and ethical approval**

Ethics approval was granted by Middlesex University Ethics Committee and by the local authority senior managers who were the gatekeepers in my study. Ethical approval was first granted for the questionnaire part of the study in February 2007 and was granted for the focus groups and semi-structured interviews in May 2008. The research adheres to research governance guidelines in social science research and in relation to research in local authorities. The research was with a vulnerable group of young people and focused on some highly personal and sensitive issues. I therefore aimed to conduct myself in such a way which was caring and considerate: ensuring I upheld their dignity and did not encroach too far into potentially distressing areas of their lives. Overall, I followed three key principles in social research: that the interests of participants are protected; that the researcher avoids deception and misrepresentation and that participants give informed consent (Denscombe, 2003, p138). I gave detailed information at each stage about the time required and informed all participants that they could withdraw at any point, that they were under no obligation to participate and that individuals would not be identified. This is discussed by Denzin and Lincoln (1998); 'respondents should not be identifiable in print and ...should not suffer harm or embarrassment as a consequence of research (p175). Written consent was gained from every research participant for the focus groups and semi-structured interviews.

Ethical considerations were considered at every stage of the research process as I was aware that there was the possibility of distress and upset of the young people given their vulnerability having been through the care system. In preparing for the focus groups I involved an experienced senior worker from the leaving care service who helped to facilitate the groups. As the information from the focus groups was also being used by the local

authority with the aim of improving the service, the young people were made aware of this. Robson (2011, p195) discusses the importance of honesty regarding the nature of the study being carried out. This was explained to the young people at every stage and was discussed with the social work students and social workers who participated in the semi-structured interviews. Pizzas and soft drinks were available for the young people on the evening of the focus groups as many were coming straight from college or part-time work.

It took time to build trust with the young people and this was created initially through the Total Respect Training and built on the focus groups. I was aware of possible issues regarding invasion of privacy (Robson, 2011, p200) as the young people may have been concerned that I had access to confidential information about them which I did not.

In reflecting on my approach I was also mindful that I was an 'insider researcher'. As well as this conferring a number of advantages including familiarity with the organisations and ability to negotiate with gatekeepers as discussed by Robson (2011) there were also a number of disadvantages. My research was undertaken across two organisations, Barnet Council and Middlesex University and I had to negotiate agreement and approval with two sets of managers. This was particularly time-consuming in the local authority given the vulnerability of the young people, and the interest of some managers who in return for giving their agreement wanted information on the young peoples' views of the service. Negotiating ethical approval and obtaining agreeing that the young people could deliver some workshops in the University was very straightforward and I received very positive feedback and support from my manager and colleagues.

## **Chapter summary**

This chapter presented key aspects of the research strategy, process, design and ethical issues and outlined some of the challenges I experienced in implementing a staged, multi-methods research study across two organisations. I also refer to the theory underpinning my doctoral study and how decisions about the research methodology and methods were reached. Some of the decisions I made linked to the organisational demands of the local authority and to the issues I encountered as an insider-researcher trying to access research participants. Overall, my aim has been to present a clear and transparent account of the research process, including its flaws so that the delays and gaps can be understood. The next chapter gives information about the project activity.



## **Chapter 4: Project activity and data collection**

This chapter describes the process of carrying out my doctoral study including the questionnaires, focus groups, training with the young people, delivering training to students and social workers and conducting semi-structured interviews. As a social work lecturer I am responsible for teaching students about social work practice. My area of specific interest is child and family social work and I bring my previous practice experience in this specialist area with me into the classroom. The theory/practice interface is central to social work education and it means that students are assessed in work practice placements and in their academic work in relation to the depth of their understanding and ability to integrate theory and practice. Part of my role as a social work academic means bringing people together to enhance this aspect of teaching including practitioners from social work and other professions plus those who have used social work services. Therefore the model used in my doctoral study was service users as trainers and co-trainers putting them in a powerful position. They could be viewed as experts by virtue of their position as someone delivering material to students and social workers. As part of the action research approach I experienced a number of challenges.

### **Work context**

My work context changed over the period of developing and realising the project. When I started the study I was a joint appointment between the local authority and the university, then I moved to being a full-time academic although retained strong links with the local authority. Being a worker researcher meant balancing the needs of two organisations with different aims. Although the common factor was the social work profession, the local authority's primary responsibility is the delivery of core services to vulnerable people whereas

the university primary tasks are teaching students and undertaking research. As well as balancing the organisational priorities I also had to balance the dual role of being a worker and an insider- researcher. This meant continuing to meet the requirements of my role across two organisations. Robson (2011) discusses the advantages of researching in your own workplace as managers are more likely to view the activity as enhancing the organisation. The University were facilitative and encouraging with an understanding of the research process. Whereas the local authority, whilst supportive, were less aware of the research process and I had to negotiate timelines, gaining access to research participants and managing my own workload.

### **Key factors determining project activity**

Key factors which determined the project activity included access to research participants, the needs of the local authority and my role in that and also trying to conduct my research across two organisations. This was complex as I was engaged in research linked to my job role, I had to demonstrate change and improvement and also carry on with my 'normal' job. With hindsight it would have been so much more straightforward to choose only one organisation to focus on but as I was a joint appointment it seemed that the research should follow the scope of my joint role. In addition, my research strategy and design is complex as it involved multiple stages. Initially, it seemed that the plan I had was achievable within the timescales but all stages did not go according to my schedule and there were delays.

### **Giving feedback to the Local Authority**

A feature of my Doctoral Project was giving anonymised headline feedback to the local authority managers following each stage of data gathering. This helped managers to plan

services and to understand the needs of young people who had been ‘in care’ and were now receiving services from the leaving care team. Managers’ interest was twofold: they wanted feedback about services and evidence to present to local councillors and inspectors showing that they were engaging young people and they also wanted a pool of young people who could ‘train’ their staff about how to communicate with young people.

### **Total Respect- ‘training the trainer’ with the young people**

Completing the questionnaires as stage one did give a useful foundation on which to build stage two as some young people volunteered for the focus groups. Following that it took considerable time to recruit young people and organise the Total Respect Training. As the course was ‘training the trainer’ this involved self-reflection and key questions including: ‘what does and doesn’t help me learn’; ‘what makes a good/bad social worker/foster carer’; the question-‘young people should be involved in training adults because...’; ‘what do professionals do-what are they?; what gets in the way-barriers to listening; ‘what can cause us difficulties during training’; ‘what helps to overcome these difficulties’. We trained together over three days and gave each other feedback about our presentation skills. We also all gave each other anonymous goodbye messages at the end.

The ‘training the trainer course’ called ‘Total Respect’ had a facilitator and from the beginning it was clear all of the group were working together. Initially I was slightly uncomfortable as I am used to leading teaching and facilitation and the roles were reversed as I was part of a group receiving peer and trainer feedback. However, I gained much from doing the work with the young people including building up a relationship of trust and mutual respect which felt like real service user involvement and participatory action learning.

Building a strong rapport with the group enabled me to develop and deliver the next stage which was presenting workshops for students and social workers with four young people.

The young people and I carefully planned every workshop and agreed in advance our teaching plan, what group exercises we would do and how we would support each other. This also required pre-meetings which although important, was time intensive in my already demanding job role. After the delivery of the training we would meet and de-brief and discuss what went well and what we would like to change. Following the training the young people and I were invited to attend a one-day staff conference in the local authority where the focus was on the needs of young people in the borough. The conference was attended by approximately 100 social work and education staff and we prepared our presentation very carefully. It also involved round table discussions with conference attendees responding to some key questions and feeding back. The young people were slightly nervous as they said they would be presenting to social workers and managers who would know them and they said they felt a little unsure about that. It was of concern that a manager asked the young people before the conference even started whether they had permission from the local authority to speak out about their experiences of being in care. They had been prepared as part of the 'Total Respect' course to expect some challenges to their work and were empowered to politely state that it was their right to speak out. Findings from the conference and the experiences of the young people were then written up in a book chapter (Allain, Cocker, Hinds, Naluwaga, Babondock, 2011).

### **Final stage**

The final stage was interviewing the students, social workers and young people to gain their perspectives. This stage also took time to plan and schedule although felt more contained and

manageable than earlier stages. Overall, it was crucially important that I kept track of the research process as at times it felt that I was being slightly diverted into delivering the training rather than keeping my action research project on track. The project activity which was central to the research linked together my key interests: social work practice, participation of service users and education. I wanted to examine how the involvement of young people who had experienced social work services in training others could shift perspectives and bring in a different voice which deserves to be heard.

### **Chapter summary**

In this chapter I outlined the different stages of the project activity and present some of the complex issues I encountered trying to manage and continue with my research. I explain why I took specific decisions and the consequences which are linked to my aims of being inclusive and transparent throughout the research process. One key area that has emerged for me was the sheer challenge of operationalising my research strategy and making it happen given the constraints of time, different stages and training with the young people. I constantly had to negotiate around timing, access and location and at the same time work within organisational structures and carry on delivering my 'normal' job. All of these issues impacted on my data collection and analysis and are revealed in the next chapter which presents the findings from each stage of my study.

## **Chapter 5: Project Findings and Discussion of Findings**

### **Introduction**

This chapter presents the findings from the survey questionnaires (50 returned), findings from the focus groups (two groups of five and six young people) and the findings from the semi-structured interviews (three social work students; four social workers and three young care leavers). The chapter begins with a presentation and discussion of the findings from the questionnaires which paved the way for the direction and focus of the qualitative aspects of the study. The data from the survey questionnaires give biographical information about aspects of the young's people lived experiences. I then go on to discuss the findings from the two focus groups and finally discuss the findings from the semi-structured interviews. Finally, at the end of this chapter I summarise the overall findings from all of the data I gathered with direct links made to answering the research questions.

### **Findings from the Survey Questionnaires**

As this was a small-scale study, descriptive statistics were used in terms of analysis to give basic information about numbers and percentages of respondents (data set attached as Appendix 1). My focus was to follow Fielding's (1993, p225) basic rules for coding to ensure consistency and clarity. I gathered descriptive data from the survey questionnaires and because of this I am not intending to show statistical significance. I sent out 200 survey questionnaires and 50 were returned. Given the sample were vulnerable young people; this could be seen as a reasonable response. Responses were analysed through the use of SPSS. The charts in Appendix 1 present the findings from the questionnaire. The data is grouped

into twelve thematic areas and each theme has a letter followed by a number for ease of cross-referencing, the list of themes is detailed in Appendix 1 and is also summarised below. Overall forty questions were asked and fifty survey questionnaires were returned. The bar charts have included on them the numbers of respondents for each question and each chart shows the overall numbers of respondents who answered each question and also the numbers of respondents who did not answer particular questions.

My data has some similarities with other data sets including annual national statistics (Department of Education, 2014) with regards to a number of key areas including housing and accommodation plus the education and employment status of care leavers, although there are some differences with my data due to sample size. National data shows that the majority of care leavers live independently with 46% of 19 year old care leavers, 50% of 20 year olds and 49% of 21 year old care leavers living in semi-independent or independent housing in 2014 (Department for Education, 2014-National Tables: SFR 36/2014-Table F1). In comparison, 77% of the young people from my sample were also living in independent or semi-independent accommodation. Although my sample reports a higher number than the national data, as I did not link the age of my respondents with their housing status, precise comparisons cannot be drawn.

In relation to education and employment data there are some similarities between my data and national data sets (Department for Education 2014). National data for 2014 regarding care leavers and education and employment patterns shows that ‘19% of former care leavers were in education other than higher education and a further 20% in training or employment’ (Department for Education, 2014, p15). Whereas in comparison, 62% of care leavers from

my sample was participating in further education. Nationally, it is reported that in 2014, 38% of care leavers were not in education, employment or training (NEET) (Department for Education 2014). This means that 62% of care leavers nationally are engaged in education, employment or training. There are similar numbers of young people in my sample although a direct comparison in terms of percentages is not useful as my sample is small. The data I gathered tells me some important things about my group, specifically in relation to their commitment to education and employment and to living independently. When these findings are added to the other data I gathered, specifically in relation to the patchy levels of support some young people received throughout the leaving care process, a picture emerges of young people from my sample who are resilient and able to use their personal agency to succeed.

### **Bar Chart Themes**

Theme A- biographical information

Theme B -newsletter

Theme C -living arrangements

Theme D -housing support

Theme E -employment

Theme F education

Theme G -allocated worker

Theme H - home visit and helpline

Theme I - access to leaving care office and services

Theme J - drop-in

Theme K - pathway plan

Theme L -service feedback



## **Analysis of findings-survey questionnaires**

The biographical information from Chart A shows that the majority of the young people were between 18 years and 21 years old (36) with twelve young people under 18 years old (two young people did not give a response to the age question). There were thirty young women and twenty young men overall in the sample which does not reflect the gender profile of care leavers in the national statistics. Government statistics from the Department for Education, (2014) show that nationally, there has been a continuing trend of higher numbers of young men in the leaving care system with 59% of males (20 years old) who are care leavers and 41% of females (20 years old) in the year ending March 2014 (DfE, 2014). Out of my sample, twelve identified themselves as an unaccompanied asylum seeking young person. Given the age profile of the young people they are likely to have required significant levels of support to enable them to make the transition to independent living. In addition, for unaccompanied young people there are well documented additional challenges in seeking to find a home and a settled identity (Kohli, 2007; Wade, et al, 2012). This issue also emerged from the focus groups.

Having an insecure immigration status and uncertainty about ongoing citizenship rights has been shown to intensify the emotional strain on young people making the transition to independence (Kohli, 2007). So on top of all the other uncertainties young people leaving care experience, unaccompanied care leavers also have to manage cultural isolation, fewer opportunities to build their social capital and are likely also to have tenuous support links as they are more recently arrived in this country. This was identified by Barn (2010) where it was found that care leavers with greater awareness and identification with their cultural background also had stronger links also with their extended families and communities.

Unaccompanied asylum seeking young people who are care leavers have more fragile connections as they have had to re-settle in a new country and often learn a new language. Foster carers who have helped to re-engage young people in family life (Wade et al 2012) can also act as a supportive bridge through the liminal phase of leaving care. This is discussed more in the focus groups findings where a number of young people referred to this.

In terms of the newsletter, chart B1 shows that most young people said they received it with 33 out of 40 rating it as good or excellent; this suggests it was a helpful source of information (Chart B newsletter theme). In relation to the living arrangements theme (Chart C) most young people reported that they were living in independent or semi-independent accommodation (37) and when asked who helped them to move into their accommodation 19 said it was a housing or leaving care worker with smaller numbers referring to a combination of people or a foster carer with two young people saying no-one had helped them.

When young people talked about housing support (housing support theme Chart D), of those who received support from the Housing Support Worker, (17), most of them found this helpful although only nine young people received support for more than three months. Given the intensive parental support young people receive going to university or in the general population (Briggs, 2008; Wade and Dixon, 2006; Wade, 2008) the young people in this sample demonstrated high levels of coping and resilience as some of them received support for very short periods. Government statistics (Department for Education, 2014, p15) state that over three-quarters (78%) of care leavers are housed in suitable accommodation although there was no national government data about the levels of support needed for young people in transitioning into this accommodation.

In terms of employment (Chart E employment theme) and education (Chart F education theme), 42 young people did not have a job. The majority of the young people were looking for work and the majority of the sample was in education (31) with twenty-seven young people at college and two young people at university. The national education attainment data and outcomes regarding young people who have been in care shows a marked difference in levels compared to the general population showing lower levels of achievement (DfE, 2012) (*Outcomes for Children Looked After by Local Authorities in England: 31 March 2012*) for children in care and care leavers. However, Jackson and Ajayi (2007) argue that young people who have been through the care system can achieve in education and that the value-added factor should be considered. The government have also made a commitment to supporting young people leaving care in terms of education and employment (DfE 2012) with a focus on trying to coordinate activities from different government departments and extending support for young people until they are 24 or 25 years old. These initiatives need careful evaluation to measure actual progress and ensure support is tailored accordingly.

Chart G focusing on the allocated worker shows that most of the young people (37) had a social worker from the 'Leaving Care Team' and eight young people had a social worker from the 'Looked After Children Team'. In Chart H, (home visit and helpline theme) 27 young people reported receiving home-visits from their social worker and 9 young people who did not receive home visits said they would like someone to visit them at home. The loneliness and isolation experienced by care leavers is a theme in the literature (Barn 2010, Wade, 2008) and has been linked to poor health outcomes and reduced access to social capital. It is a concern that all young people did not have regular visits throughout their transition to independent living. It was not possible to correlate the data to establish whether those who did not receive home visits called the out-of-hours helpline more frequently or

whether they visited the Leaving Care (LC) office or duty service (Chart I- access to office and services theme). Chart J (drop-in theme) shows that the service was used by 21 young people with 19 of the group rating it good, very good or excellent.

All young people receiving a leaving care service should have a Pathway Plan (Chart K, pathway plan theme) although 16 young people said they did not have a Pathway Plan and 12 young people said they did not have a copy. A small number of the sample did not understand the significance of having a Pathway Plan and did not help to write their plan. Given that the Plan is about their transition and future it is a concern they were not engaged in this. The young people despite some overall issues rated the service (Chart L- service feedback) they received from the Leaving Care Team as good (16 young people), very good (10 young people) or excellent (11 young people) which represents 74% of the sample. However, when the question was asked; *'Do you feel listened to and understood by staff from the Leaving Care Team'*; 26 young people said 'often' and 'always' and 5 young people said 'never' and 15 young people said 'sometimes'; there were four nil responses. Given the commitment to 'Corporate Parenting' and the avowed statement that 'care leavers should expect the same level of care and support that other young people get from their parent with strategies based on the principles of good corporate parenting' (DfE, 2012, p5) it highlights that young people do not feel fully supported and contained with the issues they face in their transition to adulthood. The survey questionnaires led to a sample of young people agreeing to take part in the focus groups.

## **Findings from the Focus groups**

Two focus groups were held on the same evening with five young people in one group (Group A) and six in the other (Group B). The young people were randomly allocated into the two groups by workers from the leaving care service. Overall, eight open-ended questions were asked, with some prompt questions. The young people represented the diversity of the local authority population and came from a range of different cultural and ethnic groups. Group A had more unaccompanied asylum seeking young people than Group B and in analysing the findings this resulted in some differences between the two groups in relation to their experiences and expectations. Both groups were mixed in terms of gender. Having a diverse sample of research participants enabled me to gain an in-depth understanding of the range of issues experienced by care leavers on their journey to independence. The individual young people although from diverse backgrounds shared the common experience of being care leavers. As former looked after children with experience of the care system they had a shared 'habitus' or understanding due to being separated from their families.<sup>1</sup>

The groups could be described as homogeneous thus creating the opportunity for the open exchange of ideas. However, I reminded the young people that they should not feel obliged to disclose any information they did not want to as part of the group discussion (Brown 1999, cited by Robson, 2011, p296). When I met the groups of young people I spent time

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<sup>1</sup> Habitus is described by Bourdieu as 'systems of durable, transposable dispositions' (Bourdieu 1977, p72). Dispositions can be described as a way of being or thinking which is unconscious but which has been internalised by the individual.

introducing myself and explaining again the nature of my research and how the local authority would also receive anonymised feedback outlining key highlights from the discussion to inform service developments and the planning of the co-training of social workers. The young people were very receptive to that and all wanted to stay and be part of the focus groups. I also spent time at the end of the focus group interviews answering questions about who wanted to be involved in delivering workshops to students and social workers and explained how the messages from the focus groups could be utilised in planning and delivering the workshop training sessions. The focus group research questions I asked were carefully worded so that their meanings were clear and jargon-free. I used reasonably informal language with the questions and also used prompts where this was required.

### **Findings from the focus groups**

I firstly present the four main themes which emerged and then go on to analyse and discuss the findings. The key themes identified were:

1. Young people's self-reliance and resilience;
2. The importance of foster carer support;
3. Importance of planning and receiving help at the right time;
4. Getting the right sort of practical and emotional support and being listened to.

The quotes from the focus group participants are identified with an A or B depending on the group they are in with each research participant given a number e.g., A 1, B 2. The findings are presented under each of the key thematic headings. Some themes overlap and are connected, for example, timing and practical help.

## **Theme 1**

### ***Young people's self-reliance and resilience***

Many of the young people were self-motivated and pro-active showing high levels of resilience; there was also evidence of young people themselves taking the initiative and being self-reliant.

*"Realistically when it came to education, I done it by myself. I knew what I wanted". (A 1)*

*"That's exactly it, because I knew what I wanted to do anyway; I didn't need much advice on that. I knew what I was good at so I just did it". (A 4)*

*"I started up my own business... I left college, because I couldn't see how to get on. They [social services] kept telling me no... They can't see that I've got to do it for myself. When they do give you support, it's the wrong kind of support". (B 6)*

There was a feeling also of the young people doing things for themselves when preparing to move into their first flat which involves decorating and finding furniture.

*"I like doing things for myself; I don't like having someone to help me all the time". (A 3)*

*"It's quite difficult to find somebody to help you so I did find someone who isn't my social worker, it was my support worker, she took me everywhere". (A 5)*

## **Theme 2**

### ***The importance of foster carer support***

In Group B the greatest source of support was often the young people's previous foster carers.

*"My foster parent helped me to get work". (B 3)*

*"Yeah, that's what happened to me. My foster parents helped me". (B 2)*

Another young person discussed how their foster family helped them with the challenges of moving and decorating a new flat:

*“Their [foster carer’s] son helped me to decorate my flat. They told him they would give him something to do it, paint everything, the foster carer helped”. (B 3)*

In Group B the young people talked about not knowing how to manage a tenancy and how they missed the support of their foster carer.

*“I never knew how to deal with a flat before because it’s all the first time getting a proper flat; I didn’t know what I had to do. And I have no one there telling me anything.” (B 1)*

*“Especially when you’re used to your foster carer doing everything for you”. (B 3)*

### **Theme 3**

#### **Importance of planning and receiving help at the right time**

Two key areas emerged as critical in relation to planning for independence; one was education and employment and the second was housing and setting up a first home.

In Group B the young people made reference to struggling with the care leaving process and expressed bewilderment with what choices should be made:

*“It’s like they put you in a room with doors and they’re expecting you to go through the right door each time without knowing anything”. (B 1)*

Others said: *“I’m grateful to them because they support me during the time I need them because I came through a vulnerable time”. (B 3)*

Some young people understood and accepted the need for a Pathway Plan which helps them to plan their future but the view generally was that completing a Pathway Plan was not always helpful due to changes not being recorded and updated.

*“You don’t even realise when you’re doing it; you say oh, is that a pathway plan? They do pathway planning and they expect you to follow it... the problem is that later you are doing something else and they think why are you not doing what you said?” (B 1)*



*“Yeah, they expect you to stick by everything you say”. (B 2)*

*“They don’t want you to develop new habits at all”. (B 1)*

*“People change. When you’re young you want to do different things. Maybe one day you want to do something; the next day you don’t but then they haven’t regard for changing”. (B 2)*

In relation to support with housing and moving to their first flat the focus group members discussed having an allowance which helped with furnishings and decoration. Some young people said they were given money with little guidance.

*“They [social services] give you a load of money and they say go out there. They give you £1,500.”*

*“...they also give it in batches as well, with vouchers. They don’t just give you cash all the time”. (B 2)*

*“Some people might think I’ll buy a washing machine for £500 forgetting about the carpet, the fridge; they forget about the whole budgeting”. (B 1)*

Some young people found the transition and practical issues challenging.

*“... they bought me a cabinet, and cooker, nothing else. I really was struggling and my foster mother had a leaving party for me and gave me some money to buy a bed. And I said to my social worker, how am I going to sleep as I need help to fix it up. I don’t know how to do that. And he said to me, you have to do this, you have to do that, but wouldn’t take me shopping to show me what me I need.” (B 3)*

*“They didn’t help me. I got no money and I went to that charity furniture shop, got my stuff”. (B 5)*

Young people expressed frustration with waiting and how no-one would go with them to stores to collect and choose household items.

*“ ... I’d been waiting for about two months to try and get paint and things like that. Just strip my walls and whatever. And I was just late and she said, oh, we’re not going now. And she says you’ve got to wait until next week, and it’s always like a week I’ve got to wait. It’s always a week. Wait, wait, I’ve got to wait”. (B 6)*

There were concerns and anxiety about rent arrears and how things were not set up properly at the start of tenancies.

*“She [social worker] should at least know how to set up certain things like my housing benefit, but she didn’t do none of that. I’m in rent arrears now because the whole process has taken so long”. (B 5)*

*“I’m in arrears”. (B 2)*

*“Everyone’s in arrears”. (B 1)*

In Group A where there were more unaccompanied asylum seeking young people they expressed fewer concerns about the support they were receiving with one young person stating:

*“I’ve got no complaints against the social services really”. (A1)*

#### **Theme 4**

##### **Getting the right sort of practical and emotional support and being listened to.**

Young people often focused on practical matters being attended to as they act as a platform for independence:

*“Money, accommodation and status... citizenship”. (A 1)*

*“Once you’ve got that you know you can do it. Then you can get out of here and fight for yourself. You’ve got to be a survivor anyway, living in care you’ve got to be a survivor”. (A 4)*

In Group B the young people expressed concern and frustration about their experiences of a lack of support. Some said there needed to be more social workers as they were unable to give the time needed and this was linked to caring and listening.

*“they’re trying to do as much as they can... there needs to be twice as many social workers but they also need to care a lot more... When I spoke to my social worker the last time I was allocated one, she’d never opened my file for a year... because we’re just a number to them” (B 2)*

There was a focus on the importance of the relationship they had with the person they were seeking advice from:

*“... it depend on the relationship that you have built with your social worker. For example, my one, ... I don’t find it difficult ... to explain how things are going in my life so if I have any problem, I just go straight away to her and explain all what’s going on and maybe ask for advice”. (A 3)*

*“Some go through three four social workers but I’m lucky I’ve had one to help me get where I am today”. (B 5)*

In Group B there was an initial response that social services would not be the first place where they would seek help although when the Group challenged this others said they would seek out their social worker.

*“...if I ask my social worker something if I don’t get it then, I’ll get it in two weeks or three weeks, time; I’ll always get what I want and can talk... she always listens to me, always” (B 5).*

All the young people unanimously felt they needed more support from the adults around them. In Group B concern was expressed about those who could not speak out and seek help:

*“... some people don’t speak out...some people decide to hurt themselves. I don’t think it’s fair for them. Some people decide to keep feelings, let things get harder and harder and harder ... that’s why some of them cut themselves, and suicide.” (B 3)*

*“Yeah, they don’t know how to tell about things”. (B 4)”When you’re in care they didn’t tell us what to expect”. (B 1)*

The young people in Group B talked about needing assertive and proactive support and felt they had to seek this out.

*“If you want help, you have to ring them, yeah and then nothing happens. But they never ring you to see how’s things going, are you paying your rent, are you making sure this and this happening?” (B 2)*

*“They should be checking up on us. We are young people; we can’t be expected to...get it right the first time.” (B 2)*

In Group A when the young people were asked to give five words or phrases to describe what it is like being a young care leaver they described it as difficult with some also saying they had experienced good care and support.

*“Difficult” (A 5) or “very, very difficult... When asked what specifically was difficult a young person said: “I cannot list the thousands of things”. (A4).*

*“I only experienced good things in care in many ways”. (A 3)*

There were numerous references in Group A to not having permanent legal status in the UK; wanting to work but not being allowed to.

*“ I’m not arguing anymore. I’ve got my stay now... I’ve got the right to work, but I know some people are still in the place where I was. That was like living in shit... We have the ability to go out there now, find a job and look after ourselves”. (A 4).*

*“...you cannot survive on £45. You just get the money, you finish it the next day and then you have problems again. Cannot work; open a bank account, no identity. That depress you; that fill you up, you know what I mean... (A 4).*

*“I have been waiting for four years now. To have my stay and it’s quite difficult for me because I have a young child”. (A 2).*

In Group B there was consensus about young people needing more support and information.

*“...try to keep an eye on young people” ... “show them the right direction” (B 3)*

One young person said regarding information; *“see, but this is the perfect example. This sort of meeting should be done with people higher up in social services.(B2*

*“Yeah, every six months I think they should ask everybody”. (B 3)*

## Discussion of findings-focus groups

In the discussion of findings the four themes are brought together as there were a number of overlapping areas. A key issue from both focus groups was the need for improved practical support in relation to financing the move to a new home. This included: finding furniture and transporting it; decorating; setting up the correct tenancy; helping young people to budget and supporting them to secure education and employment. This is at the heart of the corporate parenting task where local authorities should support social workers and support staff in their role to:

*‘...offer everything that a good parent would ... must address both the difficulties which children in care experience and the challenges of parenting within a complex system of different services (Brammer, 2010, p.289).*

There appeared to be at times a lack of cohesion and coordination with young people from the focus groups expressing bewilderment about the sort of help they could expect to receive. Stein (2005) discusses the often difficult journey to adulthood for many young care leavers despite it being enshrined in policy documents that: *‘Care leavers should expect the same level of care and support that others would expect from a reasonable parent’* (DfE, 2010, p.3). However, in relation to what the young people discussed in the focus groups, my research findings suggest there is a dichotomy in relation to what policy says should happen and the actualities of practice. The provisions detailed in the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 were enacted to improve the life chances of young people leaving care. This included enhancing the assessment process; plus improving the preparation and planning stages and the financial arrangements for care leavers. The new duties under the Children (Leaving

Care) Act 2000 also include appointing Personal Advisors for care leavers who were between 16 and 21 years and beyond this if this was required (Brammer, 2010). Many of the young people from my focus groups expressed frustration about not having the help they needed and feeling they had a lack of information during the planning process.

As discussed by Briggs, (2005) care leavers like all young people need time and support to manage the changes that adulthood brings. From the focus group data the overwhelming message was that they found themselves on a rapid one-way trajectory with a very limited safety net when things went wrong. The leaving care transition process involving also an intermediate or liminal phase was a theme which emerged in the analysis of the findings from the focus groups. The concept of liminality in relation to the young people can be linked to their experiences of uncertainty, ambiguity and lack of clear pathways in seeking their way through to independence. Similarly to findings from Lam and Pollard (2006) (cited by Leverett, 2008) the young people from my focus groups communicated that ‘the liminal stage is where the core experiences of transition take place and where powerful feelings, both positive and negative are evoked’ (p237). Although Lam and Pollard (2006) are referring to very young children starting school, the intense feelings they experienced during their liminal phase seem to be experienced to some degree again by care leavers in their liminal phase of leaving care.

Some of the young people from the focus groups referred to difficult experiences of feeling alone with no one to turn to and talked about the very fragile mental health of other care leavers they knew who were self-harming or were a suicide risk. These powerful statements demonstrate that leaving care, especially through the liminal phase, requires intensive support which some young people from the focus groups said they had not experienced. Briggs

(2009) discusses how the new social contexts that adolescents are experiencing, which may include- gang violence, sexual exploitation, bullying through social media and substance misuse-requires a new examination of adolescent mental health needs. Briggs (2009) gives examples of interactions between adolescents and adults in professional settings being characterised by adults demonstrating 'fear of adolescent emotionality' (p.52). There is reference to professional fear in relation to talking about self-harm and suicidality and it is argued by Briggs (2009) that this can create defensive professional cultures with rigid separation between adults and young people. Given the challenging context for contemporary adolescence which is intensified for care leavers, it is important that professionals and mental health services are available for care leavers and there are clear signposts to where young people can receive support when they may be self-harming or be experiencing suicidal thoughts.

The young people from the focus groups were clearly on the fast-track route to independence which has been identified as more likely to lead to poverty and social exclusion (Stein, 2005; Barn et al, 2005). This has been noted in a number of research studies where there has been an examination of risk factors in relation to homelessness and housing instability for care leavers with a correlation with emotional and mental health difficulties (Biehal et al,(1994; Wade and Dixon, 2006). As noted in the study by Simon (2008) care leavers who were more skilled at accessing support were less likely to experience homelessness and another key factor was the importance of strong support from leaving care workers. In relation to the findings from my focus groups, it was foster carers who provided the strongest bridge from looked after services through to leaving care with a number of young people speaking highly of the lifeline they offered in giving both practical and emotional support.

The findings from my focus groups demonstrated that many of the young people were pro-active in trying to progress and succeed as young adults. These are similar findings to that of Raffo and Reeves (2000) who found that a group of socially excluded young people used their own agency to positively manage their transition to adulthood. For the young people from my focus groups, the development of their social capital where there is a focus on social relationships and access to resources was largely dependent on social services supporting them in their role as 'Corporate Parents'. The limitations of this support for some young people led however to several of them using their connections with their previous foster carers to help them settle into their new homes, to secure employment, decorate their flats and find the right educational courses.

Developing social capital for young people continues to be a government priority with a study by Whiting and Harper (2003) focusing on community cohesion, young people and social capital. Other research has focused on young people and the impact of social capital in relation to crime and engagement in society Catan (2002); Armstrong (2002). In a study by Barn (2010) there is an analysis of social capital and young people in care and leaving care where there is a specific focus on racial and ethnic identity development. Like the young people from Barn's study (2010) the young people from my focus groups expressed pride in their racial, religious and cultural heritage and also emphasised that it had been largely their foster carers who had helped them to overcome isolation and become part of their communities. Findings from my study also raised issues of citizenship and belonging and that having an uncertain immigration status compounded existing difficulties.

In terms of education and employment, findings from my data showed that many of the young people were resourceful and pro-active. A range of research findings regarding the



educational outcomes of care leavers highlights the challenges young people face due to their disrupted education (Biehal et al 1995; Dixon and Stein 2005; Wade and Dixon, 2006). The young people in my study acknowledged the challenges they had experienced in education and employment but were hopeful about their future and demonstrated resilience and positivity in trying to make the most of the opportunities available to them. Data from the survey questionnaires shows that the young people from this sample had levels of engagement in employment and education/training which are above nationally reported level (Department for Education, 2014)

A significant theme which ran like a golden thread through the focus group discussions was the strong message that the young people wanted professionals to listen to them; talk to them; find out what they needed and help them to achieve it within meaningful and reasonable timescales. This can mean the young person makes a mistake the first time they try to do something but they need the safety net of being given a second and even third chance which often was not available. This can be linked to the literature surrounding the concept of 'the ethic of care' (Holland, 2010) and the concept of emotional capital (Reay, 2004). The ethic of care combines 'traits associated with an ethic of justice-autonomy, universality, rights' (Holland, 2010, p.1665). Layered over this for young people in care and leaving care is the importance of having nurturing and caring empathic, professional relationships. A finding which arose from my focus groups was that the emotional support needs of the young people was at times hidden or not fully identified and addressed by the workers. The very important emotional capital available in families, offered by parents to their children which is discussed by Reay (2004) was often absent for the young people in my study. Often foster carers provided some aspects of emotional capital and young people tried to hold onto relationships with their foster carers as they recognised that they were adults who could offer them emotional care, protection and nurturing during the difficult liminal phase.

The vulnerability of care leavers to having poorer health and wellbeing outcomes has been identified in a number of studies: Saunders and Broad (1997); House of Commons Health Report (1998) and Dixon (2008). One of the main health issues in Dixon's study (2008) was in relation to young care leavers experiencing mental health problems. The young people in the focus groups referred to mental health issues often being concealed or not fully recognised. They discussed the difficulties they encountered going through the transition to leaving care and that the emotional impact of this was not always fully appreciated. This was identified by Akister et al (2010) as a significant stressor for young care leavers who are often already vulnerable but find their vulnerability increases as they have fewer resources (emotional and practical) to draw on and find their usual coping mechanisms may not be able to carry them through a difficult journey to independence and setting up a home.

## **Summary**

The findings from the focus groups demonstrate the complexities of the young people's support networks and highlights, that for them to have the support they need, both their formal and informal networks of care relationships need to be mapped out and understood. As well as having formal 'Corporate Parents' they also had a range of other people who could be drawn on to support them more informally on their journey to independent living. Overall, what young people valued most of all were professionals- including foster carers, being available to them, showing empathy, individualised support and nurturing with the opportunity to try again when things went wrong.

One of the themes arising from the focus groups links to the importance of the social worker role in facilitating and guiding the network of services around the young person. The findings support the view that the young person should be at the heart of the care journey so that they actually shape their own needs and future pathway. Social workers and support workers as ‘Corporate Parents’ can offer support and guidance to the young person and coordinate the care network; acting as the main support person when plans are de-railed. In taking this approach, there can be a proper concentration of relevant support. As stated by Tronto (1994) cited in Holland (2010, p1677) *‘the ethic of care also acknowledges that the experience of care is important, reminding us that we should listen to what young people tell us’*. In listening to the voices of young people, the actual experiences of their care journey, both positive and challenging can be heard and valued and given rightful importance. Being an insider researcher meant that I had to build trust with the young people as some felt I may be part of ‘the system’. This is likely to have influenced what they said but also my interpretation of the information they relayed but overall, they gave an in-depth account of their experiences in key areas. The voices and messages of the young care leavers were heard directly by social workers and social work students who attended the training workshops delivered by the young people. The following section presents the findings and discussion of findings from the semi-structured interviews of these groups of research participants.

### **Individual semi-structured interviews**

In this section I discuss the findings from the individual interviews undertaken with three care leavers, three social work students and four social workers who attended the training workshops delivered by the care leavers. The questions for the research participants were linked to the four overarching research questions for this doctoral study.

The care leavers who took part in the individual interviews all participated in the focus groups and then delivered training to students and social workers. The questions asked of the care leavers were slightly different to the questions asked of the social workers and students because of the different roles they had in the workshop process. The focus groups examine and show what the young peoples' experience of leaving care actually was: particularly in relation to their experience of services, of support and how they managed the transition to independence. Following on from that, the purpose of these interviews is to link what I found from the focus groups and how this was communicated and became part of the narrative of the young people when they were delivering the training workshops to the students and the social workers. The aim was to explore the impact of their communications regarding their experiences; explore how they were received and translated by the students and the social workers and how they might be integrated into professional social work practice. This in turn was linked also to how the young people responded to the feedback they received.

### **Findings from the semi-structured interviews**

Three main themes were identified from the semi-structured interviews. Firstly: *everybody learnt something new: the young people, the students, the social workers and the organisations*; secondly, *the power of direct testimony in enhancing positive practice and meaningful participation with young people using care services* and thirdly, *the importance of listening, respecting and sharing power between young people and professionals within organisations*. They are each discussed in turn and this is followed by a discussion of findings from the semi-structured interviews. This chapter concludes with an overall summary discussion of the findings from all the data gathered as part of this project. The direct quotes from the three groups of research participants are identified as follows: social

workers have their initial and then 'SW', students are identified by their initial and then 'student' and the young people's responses are identified as an initial followed by 'YP'.

***Findings-theme one- everybody learnt something new: the young people, the students, the social workers and the organisations***

All of the participants who were interviewed responded positively about the learning they had gained through taking part in the workshops delivered by the young people. This was not only confined to the social workers and social work students but also the young people themselves who were acting as the 'trainers'. The social worker and student participants gave enthusiastic accounts of how surprised they had been by the positive experiences they had had and how it had shifted their perspectives about approaches to working directly with young people.

*"I think it was really good to hear from young people, their own experiences first hand as opposed to talking about it as some kind of case study second hand. It brings it home really because they are in the room ..."* (A SW)

Some talked about needing to change the way training is delivered in the organisation:

*"I really enjoyed it, I think it made a big difference being taught by the young people, I really just feel quite inspired by them... I think that is the first time I have been on a training course where I have heard young people speak... I could have really listened to them a bit longer actually... it does make me think that we need a lot more training in direct work in communicating".* (K SW).

Students referred to feeling inspired by the young people and were impressed by their courage, their achievements and their resilience.

*“The way they presented themselves was quite inspiring because a lot of these young people come from difficult backgrounds but they are able to get up, in front of a huge group of people whom they don’t know, and to present and organise something, in quite a fun sort of way...it kind of helped me to reconnect with what we are actually doing and what our aim is and what our purpose is of going into social work. It makes it more real... what they want is people to be honest and to be straightforward and to show them respect which is what you know already. But they framed what the importance of a social worker is to a young person who is quite vulnerable and might not have other forms of support”. (H student)*

Others referred to being challenged in a positive way:

*“I think it really challenged me in the way I see young people and care leavers because often we, [the students] when you go through the social work course, you know you are told that care leavers go out without any qualifications and the statistics about looked after children are so poor that it made me kinda say-hold on- these kids aren’t a statistic; look at the positive things they are doing and very much I got a message from them saying; look hear what I am saying, you don’t just bundle me into your procedures, look at me as an individual, hear me as an individual”. (P student)*

There was an expression of views about how the young people had helped them to see things differently, transforming the learning experience:

*“It kind of made me look at things differently... How can I make them feel like I am hearing what they are saying, You know – they felt their social worker didn’t have time for them and they felt abandoned and you kind of think, oh the foster parent is the most important person for a looked after child and I didn’t realise how important the social worker can be to that young person. It makes me re-focus on the fact that actually I am important to that young person and I do need to make time to spend with them”. (P student)*

The young people who delivered the training expressed pleasure and surprise about their own learning and expressed pride in developing skills in planning and delivering training sessions which communicated information about the needs of young people in care.

*“It was a shock for me because I didn’t even know if I could stand and talk in front of a lot of people... I was quite comfortable you know talking with them and doing exercises and activities and at the end of the day I realised that they are just people like me.” (A YP)*

Young people expressed the ways in which their confidence had grown:

*“Speaking in public, I know more about that now... I’m a bit shy but you know it really helped me ...standing in front of people. ..It is something you need to deal with because some day you will have to do that in work or even when you study, you have to do some group exercises... this was really helpful”. (A YP)*

They talked about learning something new and having fun:

*“I didn’t think it was going to be as much fun as it was. It was really fun and quite interesting because I didn’t think you would learn about how to interact with people and communicate with people at the same time so it was good”. (M YP)*

There was a focus on working as part of a team and gaining new skills over a range of areas:

*“I have learnt a lot- I have learnt to work as a team; I have learnt how to train people. I have never held a session before and taught someone- anything, like the way we did so I learnt to teach in a way and I liked that. I kinda learnt about the social workers point of view as well... I also learnt about listening- you can’t communicate if you can’t listen.”(M YP)*

The young people referred to the skills they had developed and how they wanted to do more of this sort of activity.

*“I got a lot more confident speaking in front of people, like I learnt all it takes is a bit of practice... to be good at something. I did a good few sessions and the first one was –like I was really nervous and then the second one I was a bit nervous and then it got better and better and now it’s like I can do this”. (O YP)*

One young person said; *“I actually thought that they wouldn’t pay that much attention, but it didn’t end up that way”*. (O YP). Overall, the young people communicated a strong sense of their own achievements and how this had boosted their confidence about being heard and taken seriously.

***Findings: theme two - the power of direct testimony in enhancing positive practice and meaningful participation with young people using care services***

When the young people were asked about their motivation for agreeing to be involved in the training workshops for social workers and students a powerful motivation was the realisation that direct testimony could shift and improve practice. One of the young people felt that:

*“Having a workshop session was a way to express ourselves on behalf of the other young people, I mean young people that live in care.”* (A YP)

*“I was fed up of being in care and no-one listening to me”*. (M YP)

*“Basically because it is a way to make social workers and students understand all the needs and help the young people living in care looking for something because sometimes [social workers] they might not understand.”* (A YP)

*“Students at Middlesex, I think it was good for them to see what young people thought about how social workers are communicating ... so they can prepare before they start work. They seemed very engaged, they didn’t show that they didn’t want to do it, they took part”*. (M YP)

The accounts from the young people were often strongly linked to their own experiences of being in care and having leaving care services. Sometimes the training highlighted difficulties the young people encountered in their past and they talked about how to manage this so that the training could still be delivered effectively.



*“It was hard for me to hear some things because it was what I went through and I had to accept it... It reminded me of certain things that happened to me and I didn’t like it but I thought you know what, I am here and the whole point of me doing this is to help make positive change so I have to go through certain emotions to deal with it”.* (M YP) This young person went on to talk about not being properly supported and listened to when in care and leaving care.

*“Something serious would happen before social workers understood what I was trying to tell them.”* (M YP)

The social workers felt that hearing directly from the young people created the potential for changes in the way social work practice was understood and carried out.

*“I think it keeps in the forefront of your mind that these are real people... I know young people like participation and telling their story ...this is someone’s experience you know you can’t take that away and say this is not true because that is what they are telling you it is.”* (J SW)

*“I think when you hear directly from service users and people who have been through that system it really does hit home what you are dealing with... when you are a social worker... so many people you are dealing with, so many cases, like case number one and case number two.”*(R SW).

*“Who else is in the best place to know what their needs are more than the young people themselves? I think it helps the social work profession to see this”.* (A SW)

The students felt that hearing directly from the young people brought to life what they had been taught; working in small groups with young people was also suggested:

*“Can give you an idea of what you should be aiming for and what you should avoid and that can have an impact on practice- if you have got that coming from a young person themselves you’ve got more than just an overhead with a few bullet points” (H–student)*

*“I think it is a really good idea... it made me feel quite grounded and that is the reason why I wanted to do social work in the first place was around young people and leaving care”. (H student)*

*“In terms of learning- from a selfish point of view -I would have preferred smaller groups where I would have been able to talk to the individual young person a bit more about specific issues”. (G -student)*

When asked, all of the research participants stated that young people who had been in the care system should participate in consultations for shaping local services and policies for children and young people.

*“I think that is really important. I think that every Borough and every system in the community -anything to do with community work, young people should have a say in it because at the end of the day we are the ones who are growing up into it.” (M YP)*

*“I think it is essential. I don’t see how you can work without having the young people involved.” (P student)*

*“I think it is excellent, if it is done appropriately...sometimes these young people are quite vulnerable and it has to be done in a way that is comfortable for them, but I do think from a practitioner point of view it is incredibly valuable. But also for the young people it is valuable for them to feel that they are heard and that they have got an opportunity to put their point of view across, I think that can be good in terms of their self-esteem”. (R SW)*

***Findings: theme 3- Importance of listening, respecting and sharing power between young people and professionals within organisations***

For the young people in particular a key issue for them was social workers and other professionals listening to them and showing respect which was linked to issues of power. This was a theme from the training workshops but the young people also referred back to their experiences of growing up in care.

One young person said that social workers should: *“try to listen and understand their [care leavers] feelings, how they feel, I mean make sure they listen to them”* (A YP). Another said *“actually listen, I know it sounds basic”* (M YP). This young person went on to talk about the deeper levels of communication and emotional support required:

*“Sometimes you know the way they act with young people- it is only about their job they don’t really want to understand their needs, they don’t really want to go through to their emotional feelings and see if everything really is ok. I don’t know how to put this into words, but social workers have to know how to do this because this is their job”.* (A YP)

Another young person referred to his expectations of being listened to as a trainer and taken seriously: *“I actually thought that they wouldn’t pay that much attention, you know like oh it’s a young person speaking ... but it didn’t end up that way but I honestly thought that they wouldn’t listen as much”.* (O YP)

When asked whether the social workers and students might change their practice following the training he said:

*“They might listen more and try to make it better. Because if they want to make it and be a social worker they will take that on board and work on it”.* (O YP)

The social workers emphasised the importance of listening to young people in their direct social work practice and as part of training workshops delivered by young people. One social worker highlighted it as being one of the most important areas of direct work.

*“Listening to them, without a doubt, yeah making sure that you take time to actually listen, spending that quality of time ...not to be rushed ... make them feel they can talk at their own pace basically”.* (K SW)

*“I think listening to what they want... we go in with our own agenda but actually listening to what the young person is saying is the most important thing. But also being honest with them about what you can help them with, you know you can’t promise them the world and then let them down”.* (R SW)

Showing respect for the young people and the young people themselves feeling respected was very important. One student said that when young people deliver training and are involved in participation: *“it shouldn’t be tokenistic”.* (H student)

Young people talked about feeling positive but were aware that sometimes professionals did not always see their strengths: *“one thing is they shouldn’t assume things about us”.* (M YP)

When asked about possible challenges that might be encountered for young care leavers delivering training one young person felt that being taken seriously could be an issue and linked this to care leavers being stigmatised.

*“Adults not taking them seriously... they don’t believe they can hold a professional training session... They believe this specifically because we have been in care. This is a problem I face”.* (M YP)

Students discussed the importance of showing respect and being reciprocal and thoughtful in their interactions with care leavers and young people in care. *“I always find that if you show the young person the respect that you would like them to show you then they respond well to that”*. (P student)

Another student linked the importance of respect with young people wanting their social workers to be honest with them. *“... what they want is people to be honest and to be straightforward and to show them respect”*. The student discussed how this was relayed to them in the training sessions and said... *“they framed what the importance of a social worker is to a young person who is quite vulnerable and might not have other forms of support”*. (H student)

Social workers who attended the training discussed showing respect through direct communications with young people and referred to their own practice. *“Most of the young people I come across don’t like authority or find authority difficult and so when you speak to them in a tone that is almost like I am the adult and you are the child you are likely to come up against a brick wall. And I always try to take the approach, not that we are equal as such but be respectful of them as well”*. (J SW)

### **Discussion of findings-semi-structured interviews**

The learning gained was not only confined to the social workers and students who attended the training but the young people themselves who delivered the training also felt they learnt something new. This can be linked to the concept of transformational learning and the use of critical reflection which the participants reported was an important part of the process. As discussed by McEwen 2009, all of the participants were unsettled in a positive way by the

training and the interactions they had. Previous assumptions about the expectations each group had of the others was challenged which is a key theme of transformational learning (Mezirow, 1997). The social workers and students reported hearing new messages from the young people that shifted their previously held views about the needs of care leavers. This aspect of service user involvement is identified by Waterson and Morris (2005) as giving the opportunity for seeing issues from a new perspective. Linking back to the literature review and the project aims; I was concerned to explore how the lived experiences of young people who have been the recipients of care services can enhance professional practice. In addition I was ethically committed to an approach where there was a focus on considering the needs of the young people themselves. Arguably, using participation methods to build the social capital and resilience of the young people did have some positive outcomes for them in relation to supporting new ventures, confidence and building skills. I remained aware and sensitive to the young people not wanting to be 'labelled' and supported them to self-define their strengths and achievements.

There is also evidence of empowerment, especially of the young people which is a key feature of transformational learning and action research which underpinned my whole approach in this doctoral study. The importance of relationships and making connections was an important aspect of the findings from my interviews which links to findings from Taylor's (2007) review where transformative relationships were identified when patients trained doctors and nurses. The processes and learning I undertook in preparing the young people involved of the training was aimed at creating an enabling and helpful learning environment where the young people's privacy would be respected and they would have control over how much information related to their own biographies they wanted to disclose. This created a shared understanding as the young people were prepared in advance through the pre-planning

meetings we undertook. In the Taylor (2007) review it was found that one of the most effective ways of fostering transformative learning is 'providing students with learning experiences that are direct, personally engaging and stimulate reflection upon experience' (Taylor 2007, p.182). This was a key feature of the findings from my study.

Using problem-based learning and critical reflection as part of the pedagogical process in social work education is well-established, especially in relation to involving service users (Taylor, 1997). The approach I used links to Green and Wilks (2009) model where there is group work utilizing practice scenarios led by service users. Similarly to Green and Wilks (2009) study, findings from my research also had an impact on the views and practice of professionals towards service users. The concept of 'clienthood' as used by Green and Wilks (2005) and how this can stifle democratic, sharing processes was a key issue in designing my training workshop delivery led by the young people. It was important that the young people planned carefully and prepared but also that they were leading the sessions on their own terms. This approach shows in my findings in relation to how there was a power reversal with the young people as trainers. This challenges issues of 'client identity' (Fook and Askeland, 2007) and how social workers can unwittingly label service users or 'clients' as victims needing to be rescued.

The young people shared their transitional experiences with the students and social workers highlighting how important support and understanding is for their unique circumstances. As stated by Wade and Dixon (2006) the transitions of young people to independent living is very much shaped by their socio-economic status, employment and education prospects and whether they can rely on the emotional and social capital provided by carers. This is often not the situation for care leavers who are on the fast-track to adulthood. On-going, strong support

networks were an issue which emerged strongly from my data and has also been identified by Wade (2008) as essential for care leavers.

They highlighted the importance of community links and foster carers providing bridging emotional capital (Reay, 2004). The young people shared their views about respect, habitus and power and surprised themselves at what they learnt about how to train and communicate with others. Undertaking this training activity and their involvement in this study contributed towards building the social capital of the young people which is a key government priority (Whiting and Harper, 2003). The findings from my data show that the activity of delivering and designing the training helped the young people to boost their social capital and to fight against negative labelling. The young people referred to their experiences of training in college and employment applications and also co-authored a book chapter. The personal agency and commitment of the young people comes across strongly in my data in that they felt a sense of pride in their achievements. This links to research by Raffo and Reeves (2000) highlighting how socially excluded young people used their own resources and strengths to negotiate a positive transition to adulthood.

Initially, the young people found it difficult to conceptualise themselves as ‘trainers’ but once they began the process they were very pleased to continue. Their accounts highlight the skills they gained and how they wanted to share their experiences to help other young people and to positively influence practice. This altruistic motive came across strongly in the accounts from the young people. The students and social workers had shared and similar discourses about the value they saw in the learning they received from the young people and referred to gaining new insights about the needs of young people leaving care. The narratives from those interviewed showed that the simple activity of delivering training workshops led by care



leavers gave many opportunities for in-depth learning from a new perspective and promoted organizational change about the role of service users informing practice. Overall the organisation integrated this approach and the young people were then invited to present at an annual staff conference. There is evidence of mutual, respectful sharing and the young people not feeling compelled to defer to professional views but being able to share their own views and experiences and to feel valued in relation to this. The data highlights that the young people had many valuable experiences to share about what is important for young people, how social workers should support them and what they need to make the transition to independent living. The young people highlighted the importance of family and friends' networks and how they wanted their social workers to respect and support them in building these networks as they provided ways of maintaining independence. The young people strongly showed the need for them to carry on receiving both emotional and practical support so that they could develop fully as citizens.

### **Discussion of Overall Project Findings**

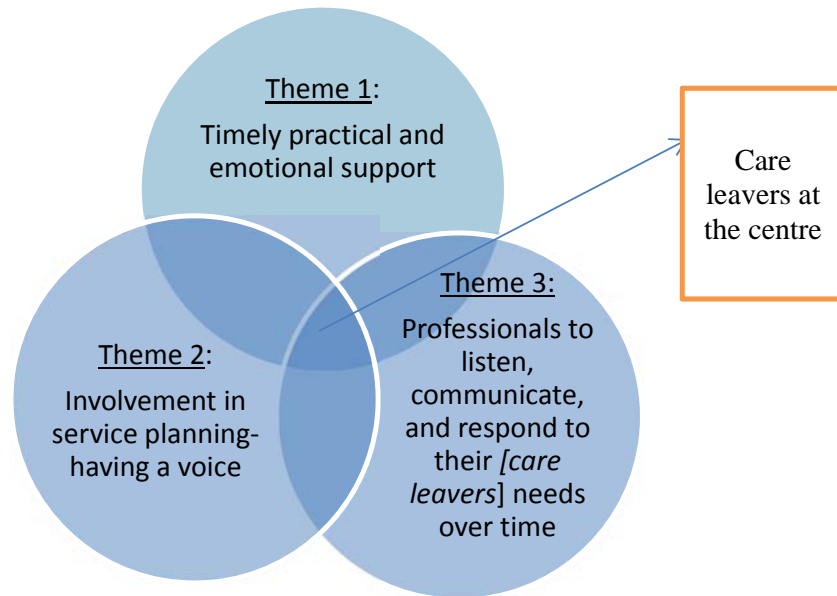
This section brings together and discusses the findings from my three data sources with links made to answering the overarching project and research aims and four research questions. There is an evaluation and analysis of the overall project findings and how they might inform social work practice with care leavers and inform social work educators about approaches to working collaboratively with young people who have experienced care to ensure their voices are heard in relation to teaching the future generation of social workers. This section also brings together findings and themes from the literature review and applies them to the discussion and analysis of the findings which emerged from the research.

## **Overview of key themes**

### **Young people's views about services they received**

The overview of key themes begins with analysis of themes from my data and at the end of the chapter there is a summary of the project. The themes from the focus groups and the semi-structured interviews had some common and overlapping areas in relation to the experiences of the young people which are presented in diagrammatic form on the next page with care leavers at the centre. The findings from the focus groups were clustered around themes of the young people's self-reliance and resilience; the importance of foster carer support; importance of planning and receiving help at the right time and getting the right sort of practical and emotional support and being listened to. The findings from the semi-structured interviews highlighted that everyone learnt something new; largely through the direct testimony of the young people and the importance of listening, respecting and sharing power.

### Integrated themes from the findings: what did care leavers say they needed?



The findings from my study showed that there was often a disjuncture between the views of the young people in relation to the services they actually received as care leavers and what the policies and legislative framework said they should receive. Many of the young people reported problems in getting the right sort of help when they needed it and at times reported feeling alone and bewildered about what to do. However, it is part of policy that ‘care leavers should expect the same level of care and support that others would expect from a reasonable parent’ (DfE, 2010, p3). There was evidence that some young people were receiving an integrated support service with clear planning and review mechanisms but this did not apply to all. There were other hidden issues which came from my data, one of which was that some young people felt alone and bewildered at times and were unsure who to turn to. This issue was also identified in research by Chase et al (2006) and was also linked to early parenthood.

Not all young people in my study reported having home visits but a number said they would like their social worker to visit them at home. Many of the young people reported having difficult transitions and struggled with practical issues including rent arrears and lack of furniture. Housing stability and support is a key measure in relation to making a positive transition to independent living and in Wade and Dixon (2006) and Simon (2008) links are made between high levels of support having a more positive outcome in terms of housing stability. There were particular challenges expressed by unaccompanied asylum seeking young people; they gave voice to their struggles to be seen as a whole person and their desire to begin living as an ordinary person. The issue of ordinariness and wanting to put down roots is discussed by (Kohli, 2007). In particular the data from the focus groups has the most information about the realities of leaving care for this sample of young people. It also shows their personal agency and resilience in trying to succeed and to seek all avenues of help to help them on their journey to independent living.

The young people described how many of the transitions they experienced had an uncertain outcome which raised their concerns and anxieties. They wanted the professionals around them to respond to and understand their worries which link to Briggs (2008) discourse about the 'slow track' to adulthood being preferable although often not available for care leavers. Feelings of isolation and loneliness were expressed by some young people as part of the focus groups and this was also a feature of the study undertaken by Chase et al (2006) in their interviews with sixty-three young people who were care leavers.

Foster carers and the support they gave were highly valued by a number of the young people. They were seen as 'going the extra mile' in trying to set the young people up in their new homes through being creative, proactive and flexible. The foster carers supported and championed the young people in education and employment and sought to help them make positive connections for their future through using their own social and economic capital where they could. This links with Jackson and Ajay's research (2007) where the young people spoke positively about feeling cared for by their foster carers and encouraged to succeed in making the transition to adulthood.

### **How the training influenced individual and organizational social work practice**

The accounts from the young people and their direct testimony provided new and challenging information for the students and social workers. It was said a number of times by the research participants that hearing directly from the young people made a difference and had shifted their thinking. The young people themselves also expressed surprise that the stories they told and the insights they gave were received eagerly and with great interest from the participants at the training. The individual interviews following the training gave detailed insights into how professional practice ideas had shifted. In particular the personal messages and stories given by the young people shifted the idea of 'clienthood' (Green and Wilks, 2005) and client identity where young people who are care leavers perhaps may be seen as needy or vulnerable instead they were seen as resilient, resourceful and articulate.

Through critical reflection and involving young people in delivering teaching the whole idea of 'expertise' and what it means was shifted around. This links to Boylan's (2000) analysis of power and how involving young people in social work education changes perceptions. From

my doctoral findings the young people emphasized how they wanted to be treated by professionals and in many instances were more concerned with the quality of care and listening they received. This links also to the research undertaken by Holland (2010) where it was found that for most of the young people the ethic of care took precedence over the ethic of justice.

The organisations involved in this doctoral project both embraced the idea that care leavers who had experienced social work services had something valuable to say to the professionals delivering care. In the local authority the participation strategy and the seeking of views of young people in formal forums has grown and developed. This is a requirement of inspection regimes and it is widely accepted that hearing 'the voice of the child' is central in service planning and has been linked to the development of a Children in Care Council. However, some of the early negotiations with the local authority as an insider researcher resulted in managers raising some issues about how the research should be conducted with their wish for a greater emphasis on gathering quantitative data. The focus on quantitative data being viewed as a desired method in local authority social work services arguably links to attempts 'to find ways to evaluate social work practice' (White, 1997, p739). However, using primarily qualitative data has given rich details about the daily challenges the young people experienced and also makes a contribution to evaluating services. White (1997) goes on to discuss the importance of 'reflexive orientation' (p748) for social work practice and research so that there can be proper self-examination and reflection on the impact of personal and professional values on the research process. This is an approach I took towards interpreting the data using a 'reflexive reading' (Mason, 2002, p149) which is discussed in Chapter 3.

## **Main messages identified by the young people, students and social workers who attended the training**

The findings highlight how the young people were respected and listened to as part of the process. A key message which the students and professionals relayed was a realisation that the young people had the same ambitions, hopes and dreams as all young people but needed help to achieve them. There was also an understanding that the help young people needed might have to be given several times as things might not always go well the first time round. The young people themselves raised issues of adults not always seeing their potential and that being a young person from care didn't mean they were not capable or clever.

Through using a problem-based learning approach with features of Green and Wilks (2005) model where service users acted as consultants; there was a focus on and open and shared dialogue between the young people, students and social workers. Messages were heard and shared with respectful listening and engagement in dialogue. In relation to Hart's model (1992) of participation there was evidence of shared decision-making by the end of the doctoral project which can be aligned with the highest rung of the ladder- 'Rung 8' - 'child/young person initiated- shared decisions with adults'. This was in relation to planning workshops, sharing ideas, bringing resources and offering guidance amongst the group and applied to all the young people involved in the final stage of the project. Over the years of completing my research project I regularly reviewed the steps taken in terms of participation to reflect on where I was on 'the ladder' using Hart's (1992) model. The model begins with stage 1- 'manipulation'; stage 2- 'decoration'; stage 3- 'tokenism'; stage 4- 'assigned but informed'; stage 5- 'consulted and informed'; stage 6- 'adult initiated, shared decisions with children' stage 7- 'child initiated and directed'; stage 8- 'child initiated, shared decisions with adults'.

Overall, using the metaphor of a 'ladder' helped me to reflect on my actions and my work with the young people. It also provided a very helpful model when explaining my approach to the local authority and how certain approaches would be purely tokenistic –rung 3 of the ladder.

A message that came across was in relation to the young people being 'experts by experience' (Allain et al, 2006; Robinson and Webber, 2012) which means they were able to articulate and frame their own experiences of receiving child welfare and leaving care services in a way that could be received and understood by the students and the professionals. The key messages were the importance of a shared dialogue, not making assumptions and that learning opportunities can be found in a range of different contexts and that drawing on the actual experiences and care journeys of the young people helped the students and social workers to engage emotionally with the young peoples' individual accounts. The views of care leavers helped the students and social workers understand the young people's needs in terms of both the ethic of care and the ethic of justice (Holland, 2010, p1676). In addition, the shifting of the power dynamic enabled more open dialogue. This point is discussed in the literature where Boylan et al (2000) refer to Foucault (1980) and argue that 'the way to understand power is to explore the way it is exercised and experienced from the perception of the subject' (p. 555). In this doctoral study, the 'subjects' were the young people and due to their role in the project, different perspectives were more thoroughly explored and understood with different positions respected.



## **Development of the young people's social and economic capital**

As discussed in the literature review seeking to positively influence young peoples' social and economic capital is a priority for social welfare practitioners, educationalists and politicians. Using Bourdieu's theoretical work in this project was very useful as it provided a theoretical construct which aided me in my understanding and analysis of the perspectives of the young people, their circumstances and what they felt they needed from adults to build their social capital. This action research project contributed to helping the young people who were involved in developing further skills, thus improving their social and economic capital. Some young people went on to study and seek employment and said that being involved in the project gave them additional confidence in using their skills. The University was able to give employment and educational references which facilitated the progress of the young people. In addition, a smaller group of young people were involved in writing a book chapter with a title chosen by them; '*What's important for looked after children? The views of young people leaving care*', (Allain, L and Cocker, C, with Hinds, O, Naluwaga, E and Babondock, A, 2011).

Some of the young people also made a short film which is used for teaching students about how to communicate young people leaving care. The funding for making the film and the commissioning came from a Middlesex University teaching grant for service users in social work and was a collaboration between the young people and a film-maker commissioned to work with them (Powerplay Productions). Some of the young people have maintained their contact with the university and have been involved in other projects where they have had sessional paid employment including social work teaching sessions and admissions days. The ongoing commitment to the young people and their future has been shared and supported

with the social work team and academic department. Bourdieu's theory of social capital and an exploration of how this can be understood and harnessed to support care leavers shows that for local authorities to be effective 'Corporate Parents' supporting the young people they are responsible for requires using meaningful and creative approaches. The concept of social capital and its use as an analytic device helped to uncover the unique experiences of care leavers in this study, across a number of areas, including housing, education, social relations and employment opportunities. Using participation approaches in partnership with universities can assist care leavers in building their own social capital with support from academics. In my study, the role of foster carers was identified as very important. They appeared to be prepared to give support often above and beyond their duties in relation to providing ongoing practical and nurturing care. This is also revealed in research by (Jackson and Ajayi 2007, p. 66) where young people talked about their foster carers really helping them to succeed at school. Foster carers can be viewed as providing important social networks and acquaintances, bridging social capital and emotional capital. Emotional care and nurturing was revealed to be so important for the care leavers in my study and they referred to some young people suffering loneliness, depressive feelings and self-harm. Care leavers don't have the same access to a nurturing emotional life as other young people and foster carers also provided this even after the young people had moved on to independent living. For some young people they were seen as a life-line, people who were there and could help them. This links to the literature examined in Chapter 2, Section ii.

The key themes in this doctoral project began with an overview of the policy and legislative landscape and charted a time-line showing how social policy has changed and strengthened since the 1960s and 1970s regarding the state meeting the needs of care leavers. There were links with the development of children's rights and an illustration of how policy aspirations in

relation to children's rights and hearing 'the voice of the child' had shaped legislation and social work practice in local authorities and across the child welfare sector. One of the aims of the project was to deepen social workers' and social work students' understanding of the needs of young people in care and leaving care through hearing directly from them about their liminal and transition experiences. Choosing to undertake my research in a number of stages was complex and time-consuming but I was committed to trying to understand the perspectives of young people themselves; their experiences and how they wanted these experiences to be communicated and received. This took time to deliver and research.

The literature review spanned different areas of literature. The first area of the literature review focused on care leavers and their experiences of transitions with links to social capital. The second area of the literature which was examined was in relation to social work education and the curricula, transformational learning and service user involvement. My approach to completing this study was grounded in participatory action research with a focus on the involvement and empowerment of young people who are service users. There were links to critical analysis and reflection (Fook and Gardener, 2007) and the application of transformational learning (Mezirow, 1997). I was interested in trying to capture the experiences of young people who had been in care and were now receiving leaving care services so that their stories and direct testimony could be heard directly by students and social workers. I hypothesised that this approach would deepen practitioners' and students' understanding and also influence the organisations within which the study took place so that policy and practice could be improved.

Professionals, as part of a legal requirement in social work practice, are exhorted to ensure they hear and take account of 'the voice of the child'. It is enshrined in law and stated in the

Children Act 1989 and the Children Act 2004 that local authorities have a duty to ascertain a child's wishes and feelings during child protection processes. Similarly, when children and young people are subject to care proceedings or in contested private law proceedings practitioners must ensure they seek out and present the views of the child/young person who is the subject of concern. My interest and concern was to support and explore how young people who have lived in care and have experienced leaving care services can collectively share their experiences so that others can learn directly from them. The aim was to achieve meaningful dialogue and mutual understanding between the young people, students and social workers. I was also seeking to influence the young peoples' social and economic capital and to support and mentor them in developing new skills in communication, training and presentation. The research design and methods were selected to facilitate processes of trust, exploration and empowerment with the young people. In response to my four key research questions, these are the points that emerged most strongly.

Involving young people in training social workers in a small-scale project has shown that this approach has the ability to change social work practice for the better. With the right support and guidance young people can co-produce teaching plans and engage groups of professional in meeting key learning objectives. This doctoral project gives a detailed account of the dedication and motivation of the young people who were involved and shows their commitment in trying to make changes and improvements for children and young people currently receiving child-welfare services. The next chapter moves onto my own personal research doctoral journey.

## **Chapter 6- Reflexive account of personal learning and professional journey**

My research journey has been both rewarding and challenging and at times I wondered if I would ever complete the writing up of my project. Other priorities became urgent and pressing and included leading and managing teams and responding to inspection requirements from outside professional bodies. I also became involved in a range of other research and scholarly activities which I very much enjoyed being part of but they diverted me from my doctoral work. I also changed job twice during the process which impacted on the time I had available to complete the write up of my research project.

Of key importance is that the doctoral project gave me the opportunity to work directly with care leavers. I learnt from them that care leavers need a trusted adult to stay with them through their transitional care journey, especially when things go wrong or don't go to plan. It reinforced the message that care leavers, like most young people, need more than one chance to make a success of their future whether in relation to education, employment, housing or relationships. This has been identified in the findings from recent government research (National Audit Office, 2015) which showed many young people experience significant deprivation and loneliness with an overall lack of follow-up and support as they navigate young adulthood. The report found poor outcomes for care leavers and a lack of proper coordinated support. The government is being challenged to respond to this. When things did go wrong for some of the young people who took part in my study, they often felt that professionals didn't always help them to get a second chance or they often weren't there to help them solve a problem so that they could go forward and succeed. A key message is that professionals and carers should remain committed to the young person and not give up on them when things go wrong but help them to get back on track. That's what parents do for

their own children so local authorities in their role as ‘corporate parents’ should implement this for care leavers.

I also learnt alongside the young people the steps necessary to successfully complete an action research project. Although my project work took time and considerable resources, there was also real satisfaction and enjoyment derived from working with the young people in planning the sessions, in writing for publication, in teaching and in developing the work around the film vignettes. My study’s focus on collaborative working across two organisations plus engaging young people who are often ‘hard to reach’ gave me a number of challenges and puzzles which I sought to resolve. My project had relatively simple aims but the execution was highly complex. I have learnt the importance of perseverance, resilience and attention to detail so that the research strategy could be implemented. It has deepened my understanding of the needs of care leavers and strengthened my commitment to young people being involved in delivering aspects of social work education and practice and ensuring their voices are heard.

## **Outcomes**

Outcomes for this work-based doctoral study include the integration of the involvement of care leavers into the social work curriculum at the University. In particular, this includes delivery of workshops to social work students about what is good practice in this area. The workshops have been embedded into the curriculum and take place every year. Young care leavers are also involved in social work admissions interviews and in assessing readiness for direct practice before social work students go out on placement. Another outcome which is linked to my doctoral project is that the young people made a short film during my doctoral

study which I commissioned in my role as Director of Social Work Programmes. This short film is used as a teaching tool and focuses on teaching students about the needs of care leavers and gives information about how to communicate with young people. I also wrote a book chapter with the young people focusing on the voices of young people in care and leaving care (Allain, Cocker, Hinds, Naluwaga and Babondock 2011). Within the local authority the young people have been involved in delivering training to social workers and managers about their experiences. In Chapter 7 there is a more detailed commentary and analysis about the project outcomes and how they have influenced and advanced organisational and professional practice in the field of social work.

The major conclusions from my work-based doctorate are that directly hearing the voices of young people who have experienced child welfare services can shift thinking and inform new approaches to practice both for individual social workers and organisations. The recommendations are that young people who have experienced being in care and leaving care services should be supported to contribute to social work education and training as they can provide valuable direct testimony about what is needed from professionals to support care leavers through the processes of striving to succeed in independent living. This continues to be an urgent priority as despite avowed improvements to services, considerable challenges remain for young people who are care leavers. The standards of care and outcomes experienced by the young people described in this doctoral study are echoed in a recent National Audit Office Report (NAO) (DfE, 2015). In this report, a number of enduring themes are highlighted which remain a concern and have also been identified in the findings of my study. These include two-thirds of councils having their services for care leavers classified as 'inadequate' or 'requires improvement' by Ofsted in 2013/2014. Comparative data about the fast-track to adult hood experienced for care leavers is given by Ofsted and

shows similarities with some key findings from my doctorate. The data from the NAO (DfE, 2015) showed that 33% of care leavers left foster care before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday; by comparison, 55% of young people from the general population still lived with their parents at 22 years old in 2013. Echoes of what the young people revealed in my study about their lonely and precarious journeys to adulthood are also discussed by the NAO report (DfE, 2015). There is acknowledgement that ‘the quality of support for care leavers has been patchy and that their journey through life can be lonely, disrupted, unstable and troubled’ (NAO, DfE, 2015, p5). A commitment is made to making change and a new inspection regime has been introduced and authorities are being challenged to develop and radically improve services. This issue achieved even greater prominence when proposed changes to services for care leavers were announced in the Queen’s Speech to Parliament on the 18<sup>th</sup> May 2016 (The Guardian, 15 May 2016). The details include a new ‘care leavers covenant’ which will require local authorities to publish detailed information for care leavers about the housing and employment support they are entitled to. There will also be an extension of the role of Personal Advisors; so that they are available for all young people until 25 years old.

It will be important to evaluate the impact of these changes and any additional funding streams which will be delivered within the context of the current severe cuts to public services and stringent eligibility criteria for a range of benefits. This issue has been raised by the Care Leavers Association, which is a charity led by care leavers for care leavers. They welcomed the new proposals but said the changes were not far-reaching enough and that a broader range of services were needed. They referred to some care leavers ‘struggling to survive... and said: ‘we need to see the application of far greater additional resources – social, cultural and emotional, as well as financial - to ensure the care and leaving care



system can provide a sound platform for successful adult life' (Care Leavers Association, 2016). Many of the young people in my research study shared this perspective.

## **Chapter 7: Conclusion and implications for practice, policy and further research**

In this Chapter there is an outline of the key implications my doctoral project has for policy and practice and for future research. This doctoral study makes a contribution to social work practice and research in relation to how to involve care leavers in sharing their story so that services and practice can be improved. My work adds new information about the individual lives of care leavers and what they need to negotiate adulthood often in the context of real material and social disadvantage. The findings from this project highlight the complexities of developing active and meaningful participation strategies with young people who have experienced care services. My approach draws on facets of co-production which is a feature in adult social care whereas I have achieved this with young people.

At times I found it challenging to manage and organise the data I had gathered and also with trying to maintain a focus on my study which has two linked parts. The first being the experiences of care leavers and the second; how these experiences can be communicated to social work students and professional in order to improve practice. In addition, the second aspect of my project focuses on systems for hearing the voices of children and young people who have experience of the care system. Since I started this project, systems have improved and the views of children in care and leaving care are promoted through local authority 'Children in Care Councils' and through the work of the Children's Commissioner.

However, there has been less focus on young people delivering training and education. This is now being considered in different child welfare settings including as part of the family justice system. Traditionally, the representation of the views of individual children and young people about their care experiences has been a key part of social work practice and is enshrined in law in relation to the 'paramountcy principle' where the Children Act 1989

states that the best interests of the child should be paramount in any decisions about their future. Collectively, however, the voices of children and young people who have been involved in services for looked after children and leaving care have been more fragmented. My recommendations for practice are that all social work programmes should have direct teaching and delivery of workshops from young people who have experience of care and leaving care as a way of strengthening and positively influencing more child and young–person centred practice.

In addition, having workshops delivered by young people in local authorities and statutory child welfare agencies means that organisations hear directly from those they deliver a service to which creates a feedback loop and can trigger changes and improvements. Being an insider researcher does bring advantages in relation to this as there is continued direct access to the decision-makers and greater opportunities to influence on-going work. However, it also brings additional responsibilities as being an insider researcher and forming relationships with the young people also meant that I advocated for them which was part of the expectations they had of me in undertaking this project. This is discussed in other research involving young people where researchers discuss participatory research approaches with young people where there was a commitment to “making a difference” to the lives of the young people. The research, similarly to mine, was ‘founded in a theoretical framework of social justice’ (Dentith, et al (2012). In my research this was linked to using social work professional values which underpinned my project. This requires power-sharing, time and investment so that organisational listening and change can be embedded. There is nothing more powerful than direct testimony for changing views and long-standing organisational structures as evidenced by the outcome of young people speaking at the Family Justice Young People's Board 'Voice of the Child' conference. Their direct testimony has led to

changes and improvements in children and young people being able to contact and communicate with social work professionals and the courts so that their voices can be properly heard when the courts and social workers are making decisions about their future including where they should live and with whom. Nevertheless, further changes are needed including longer-term follow up and support by local authorities for care leavers.

### **Implications for practice, policy and research**

The findings from this study have been shared with three London boroughs who have expressed a wish to develop a collaborative project with their 'Children in Care Council'. This will involve young people designing and delivering a workshop for students which will be evaluated. I have also plan to submit an article from my Doctorate to an academic journal- 'Social Work Education' focused on service user and carer involvement in social work education. I will also be presenting my findings at a European wide children's rights conference in Brussels (July 2016) where the focus is on working across Europe to promote the rights and well-being of children and young people. I have also been advised to consider putting myself forward to edit a special edition of a journal on this topic.

Chapters one, three and four demonstrate that delivering an action research project and promoting change with young people from a disadvantaged group takes time, organisational commitment, trust and creative engagement. Through the young people delivering training and engaging in a new way, with the students and social work practitioners, the students and professionals experienced a different dimension to social work practice. This resulted in a deepening of their understanding of issues of power and of how to communicate and engage with young people who have been through the care system.

The outcomes and impact of this project have influenced practice across two organisations: the local authority and the University. The project raised the issue of how young people in care and leaving care can actively contribute to the local authority's strategy and practice in involving young people in policy making committees. This then developed into the 'Children in Care Council' where young people, managers and local politicians are represented. The involvement of care leavers as service users is now embedded and integrated into all aspects of the social work curriculum at the University and this is delivered annually.

I have argued that there is a need for 'social scaffolding' (Avery and Freundlich 2008, p. 255) for care leavers which focuses on practical and emotional support plus systems for nurturing and developing social capital. Through focusing on building social capital and in working with care leavers' new social networks were created through my doctoral project. This then facilitated positive outcomes through reciprocity, 'leading to the achievement of mutual goals' (Schuller et al 2000, p1). Social work programmes and social work agencies should consider resourcing and supporting the input of young people who have experience of care so that practice can be enhanced, to give young people the opportunity to enhance their skills and so that new pedagogic approaches can be delivered creating more effective practice.

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### **Appendix 1-data from the questionnaires**

Numbers of respondents are included in a box in each bar chart, the themes are as follows:

#### **Charts A-L**

**A** 1, 2, 3- biographical information theme

**B** 1, 2, 3- newsletter theme

**C** 1, 2 -living arrangements theme

**D** 1, 2, 3- housing support theme

**E** 1, 2, 3, 4 -employment theme

**F** 1, 2 -education theme

**G** 1, 2 -allocated worker theme

**H** 1, 2, 3- home visit and helpline theme

**I** 1, 2, 3, 4, 5- access to leaving care office and services theme

**J** 1, 2, 3- drop-in theme

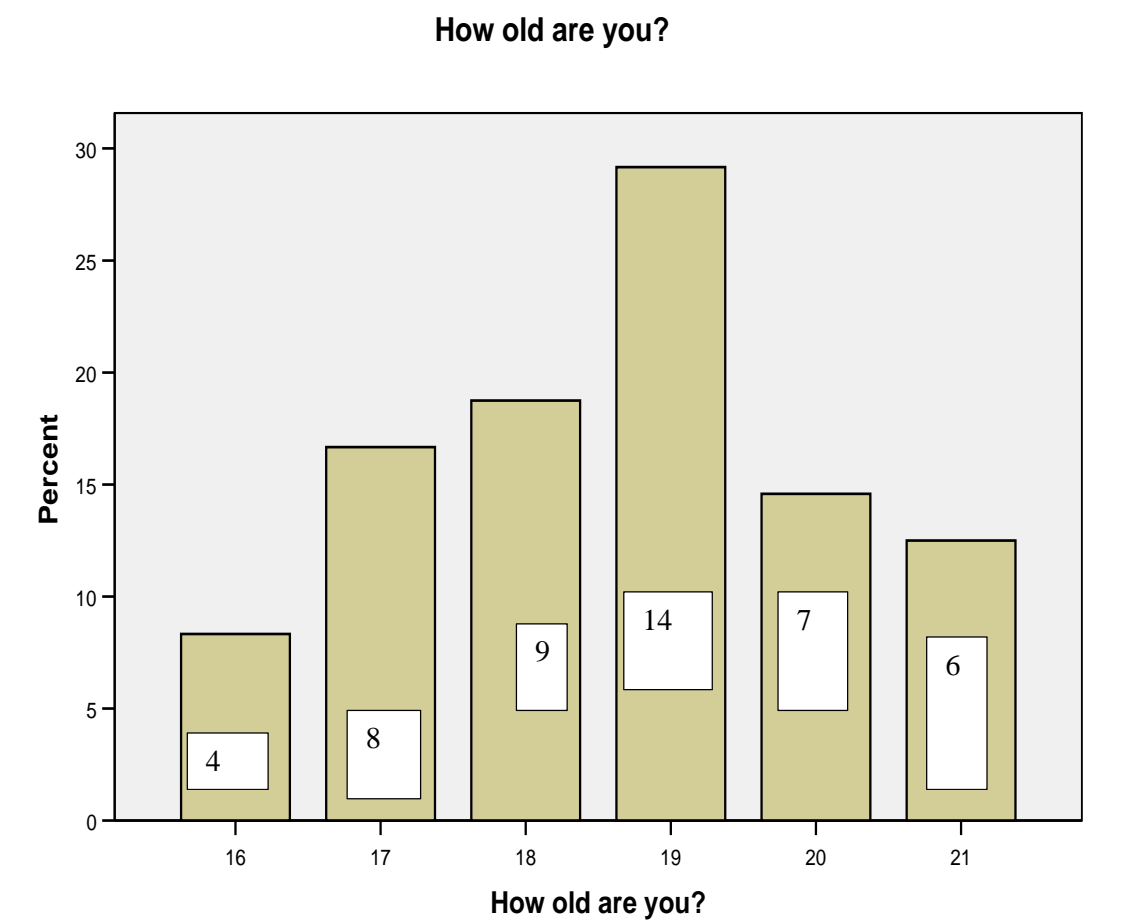
**K** 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7- pathway plan theme

**L** 1, 2 -service feedback theme

**Chart A: Biographical information theme**

**Chart A1 -How old are you? (numbers of young people in each age group in the vertical axis)**

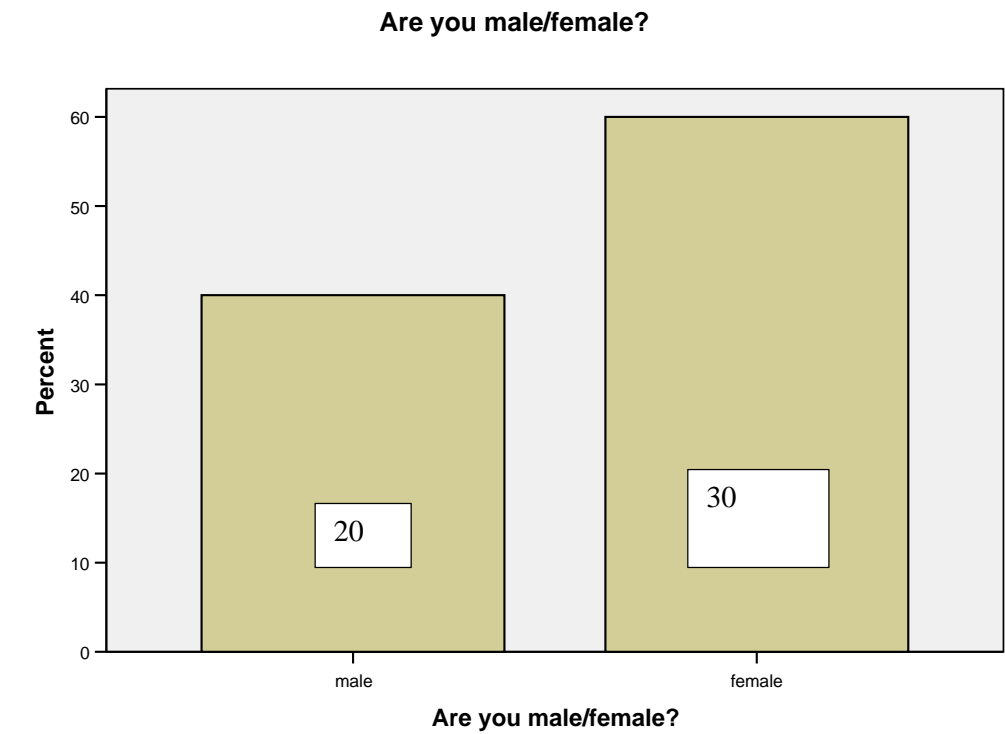
N	Valid	48
	Missing	2



**Chart A2 –Are you male or female?**

How old are you?

N	Valid	50
	Missing	0



**Chart A3 –Are you an unaccompanied asylum seeking young person?**

N	Valid	46
	Missing	4

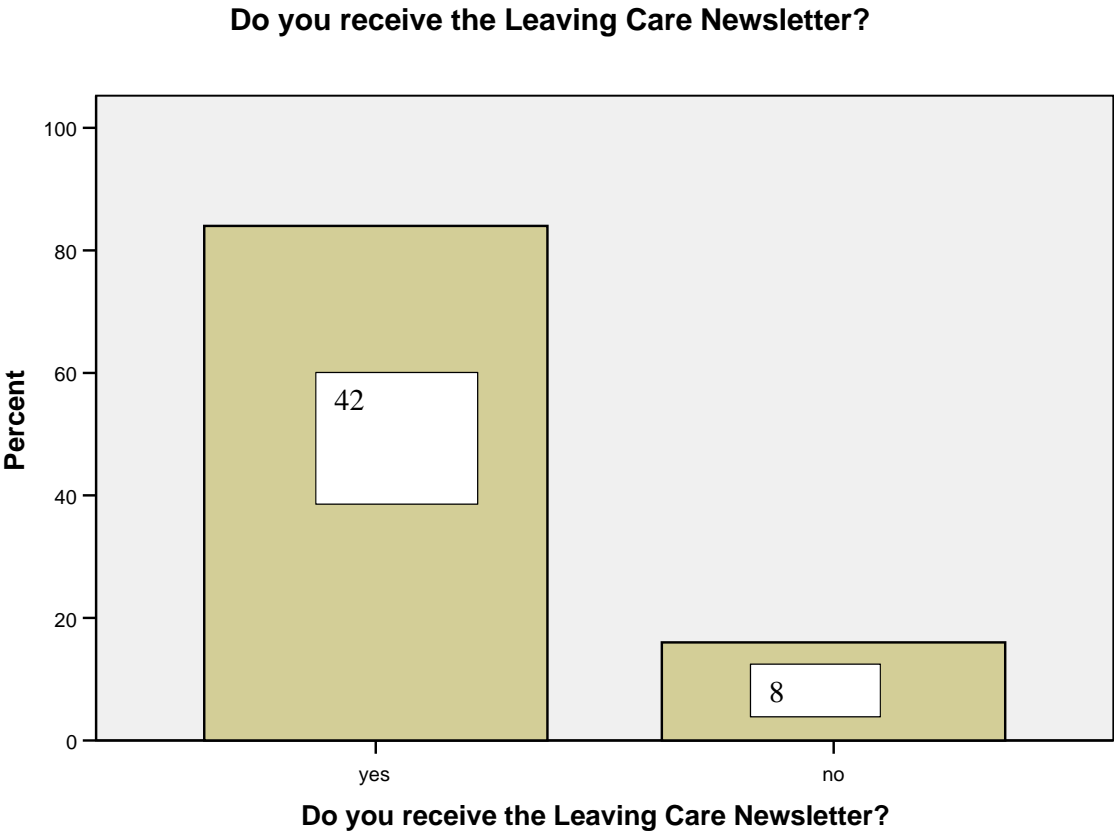




**Chart B- Newsletter theme:**

**Chart B1- Do you receive the Leaving Care Newsletter?**

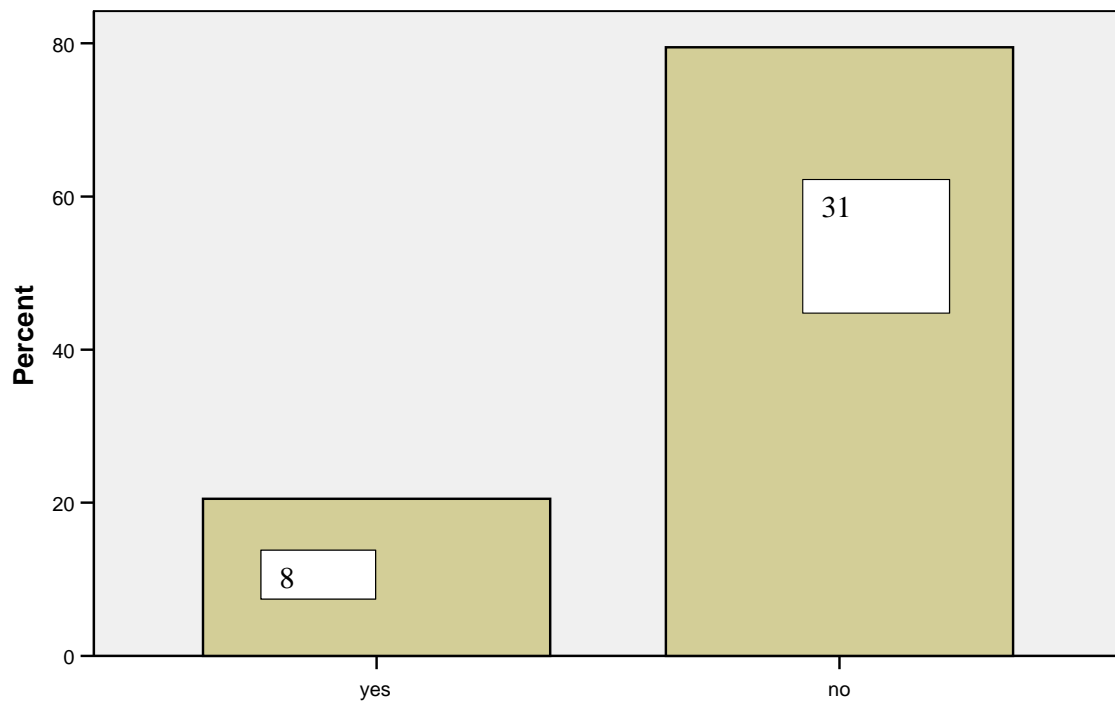
N= 50



**Chart B2- Have you ever made a contribution to the newsletter?**

N	Valid	39
	Missing	11

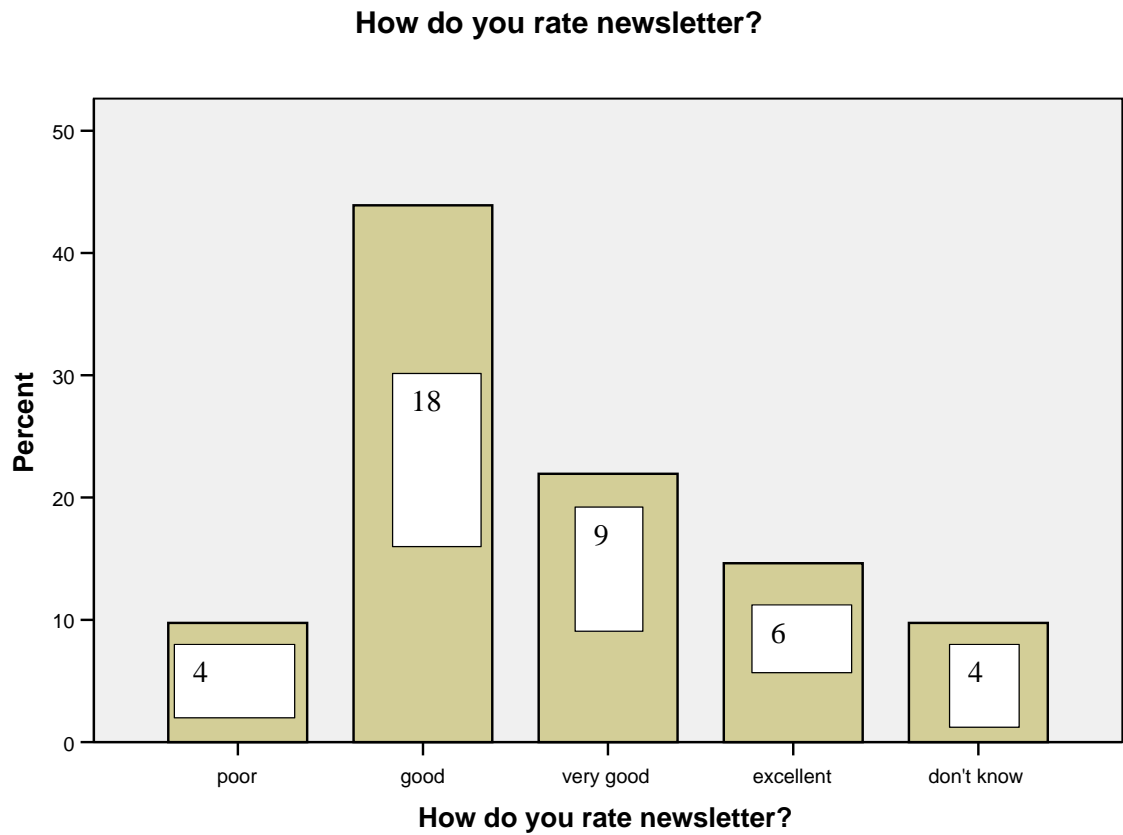
**Have you ever made a contribution to the newsletter?**



**Have you ever made a contribution to the newsletter?**

**Chart B3- How do you rate the newsletter?**

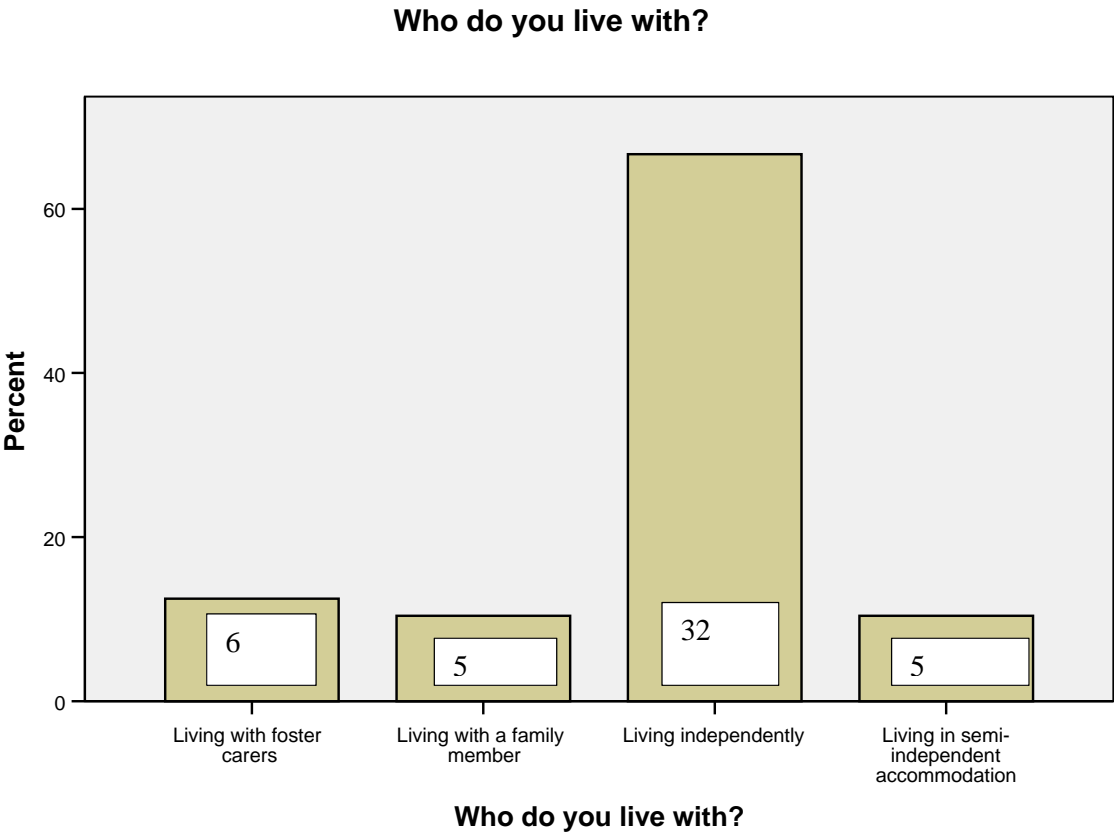
How do you rate newsletter?		
N	Valid	41
	Missing	9



**Chart C- Living arrangements theme**

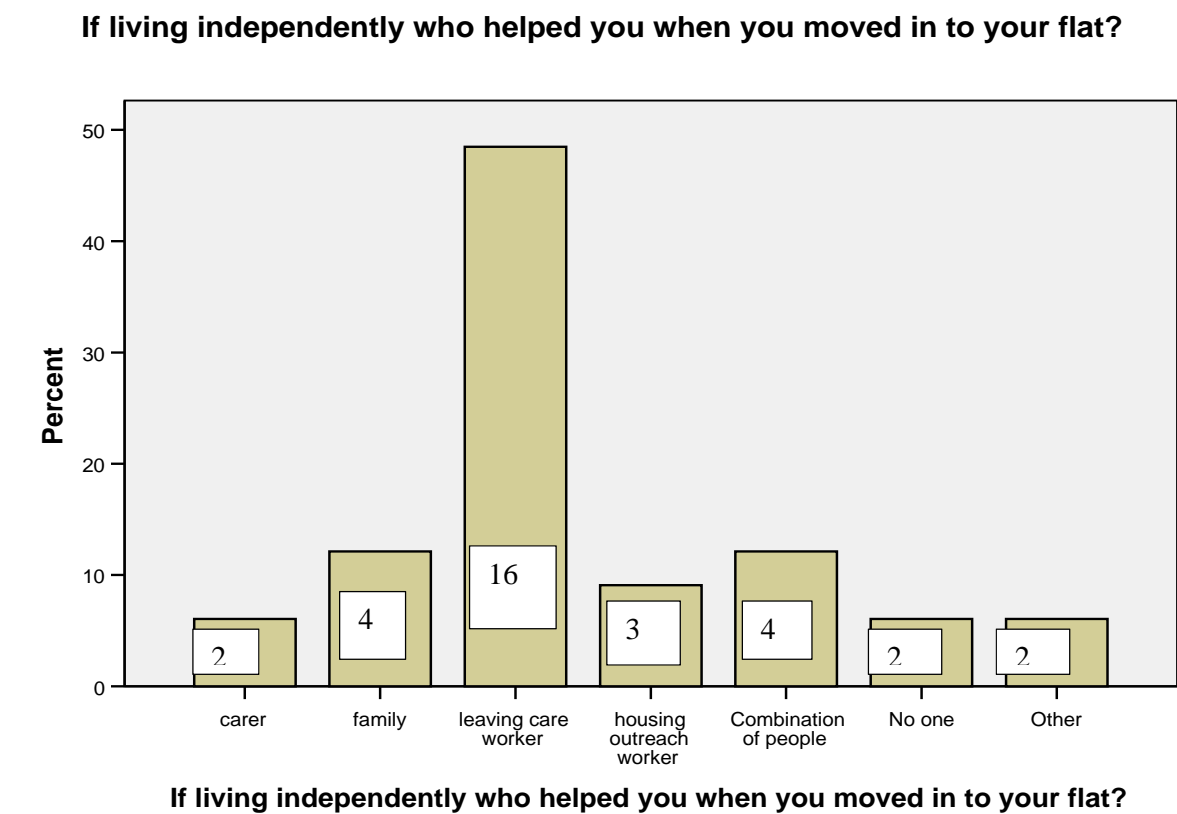
Chart C1 -Who do you live with?

N	Valid	48
	Missing	2



**Chart C2- If living independently who helped you when you moved in to your flat?**

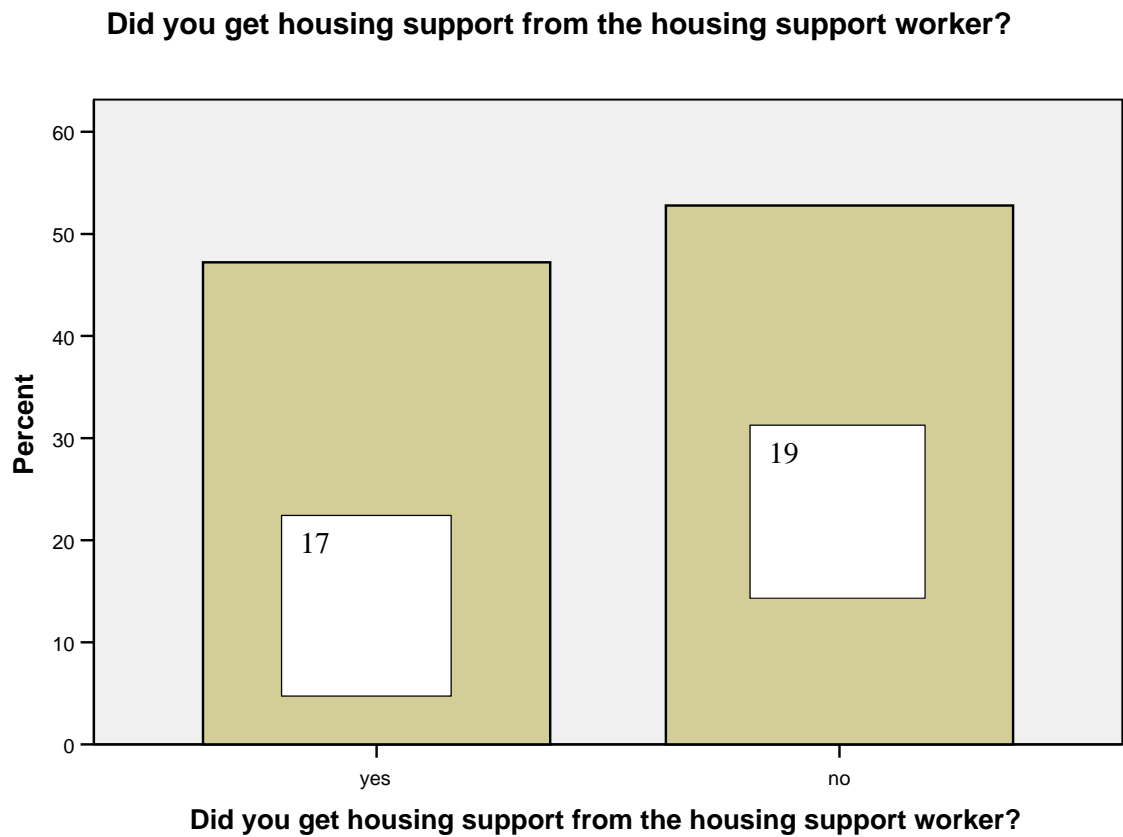
N	Valid	33
	Missing	17



**Chart D- Housing Support theme**

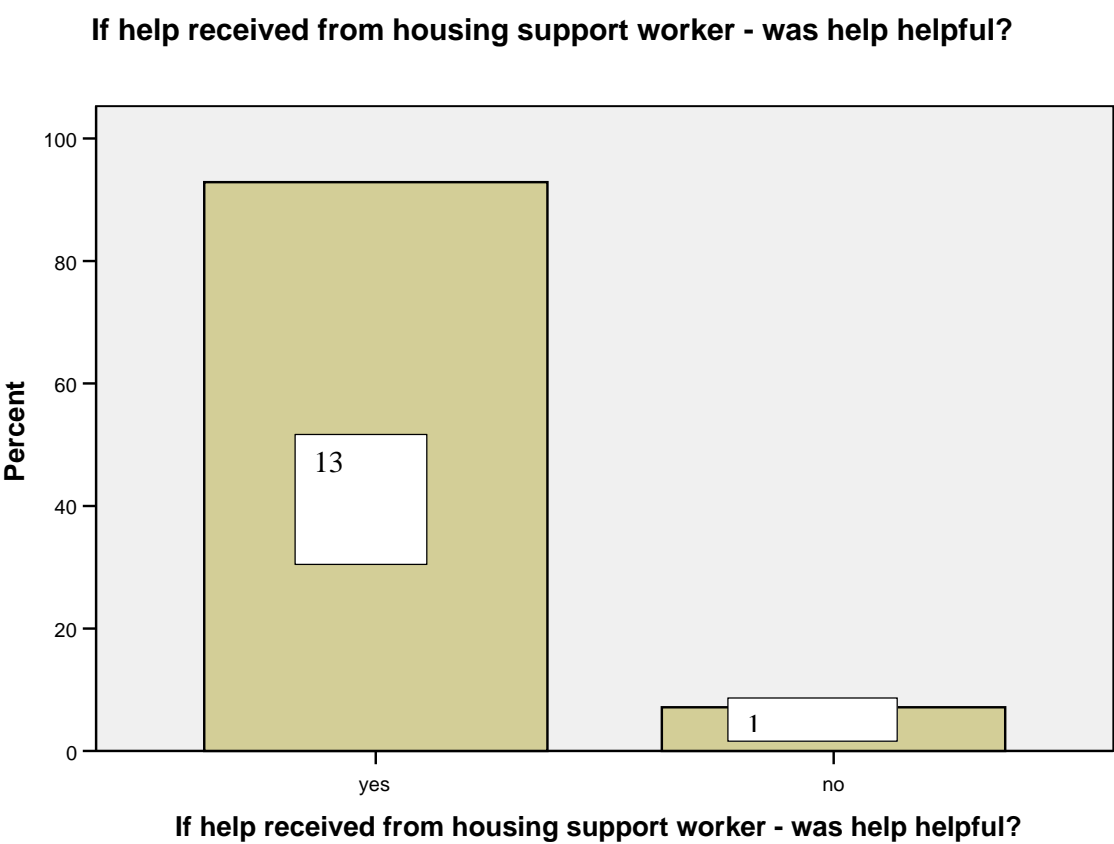
**Chart D1 -Did you get housing support from the housing support worker?**

N	Valid	36
	Missing	14



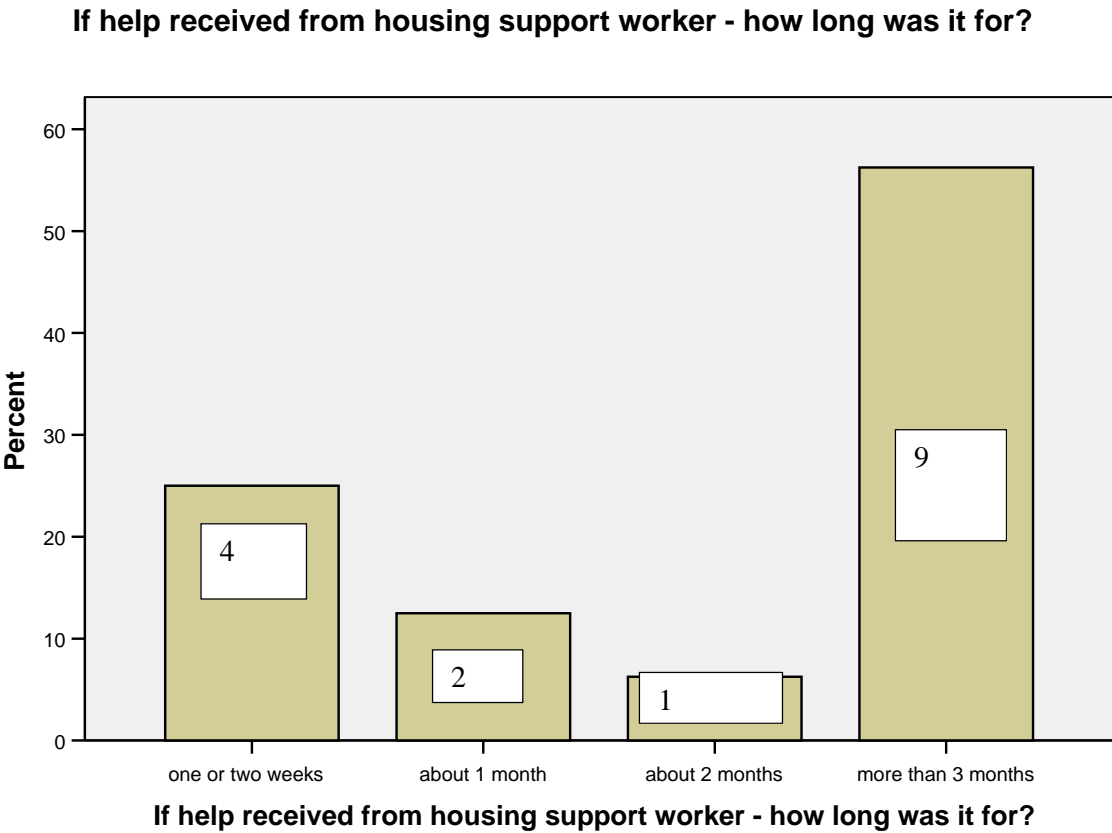
**Chart D2- If help received from housing support worker - was this helpful?**

N	Valid	14
	Missing	36



**Chart D3- If help received from housing support worker - how long was it for?**

N	Valid	16
	Missing	34

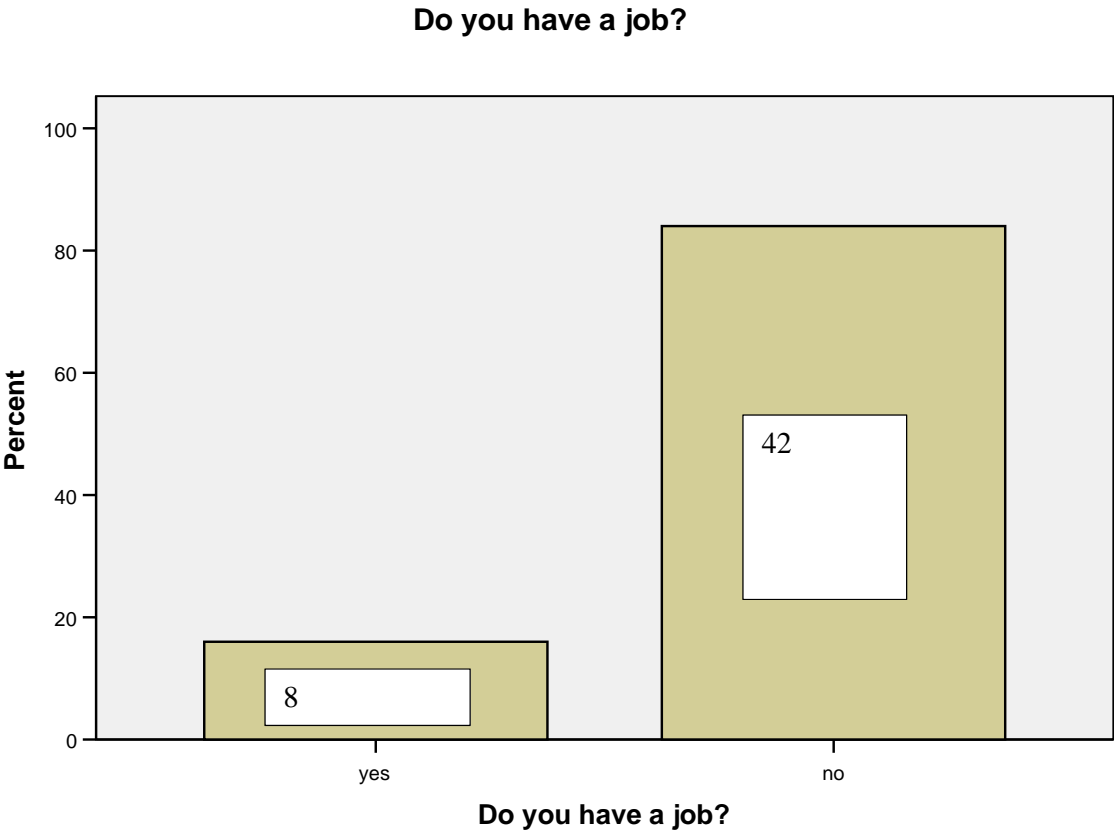




**Chart E- Employment theme**

**Chart E1 -Do you have a job?**

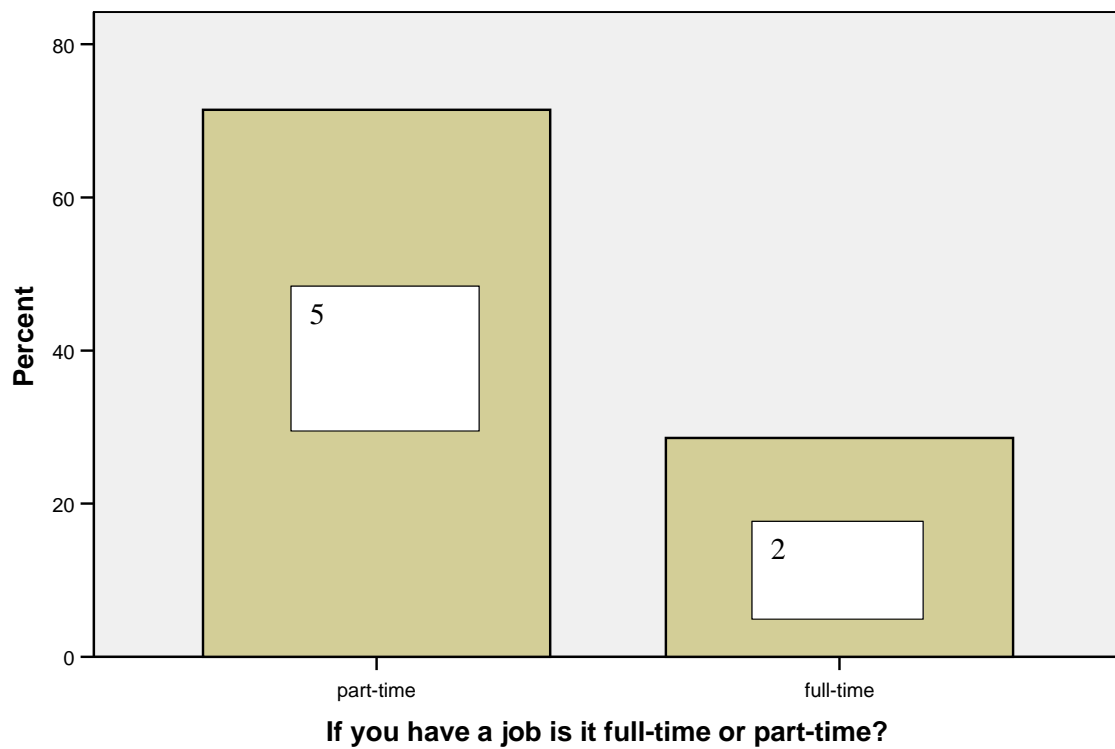
**N=50**



**Chart E2- If you have a job is it full-time or part-time?**

N	Valid	7
	Missing	43

**If you have a job is it full-time or part-time?**



**Chart E3- If you have a job is it permanent or temporary?**

Statistics

N	Valid	7
	Missing	43

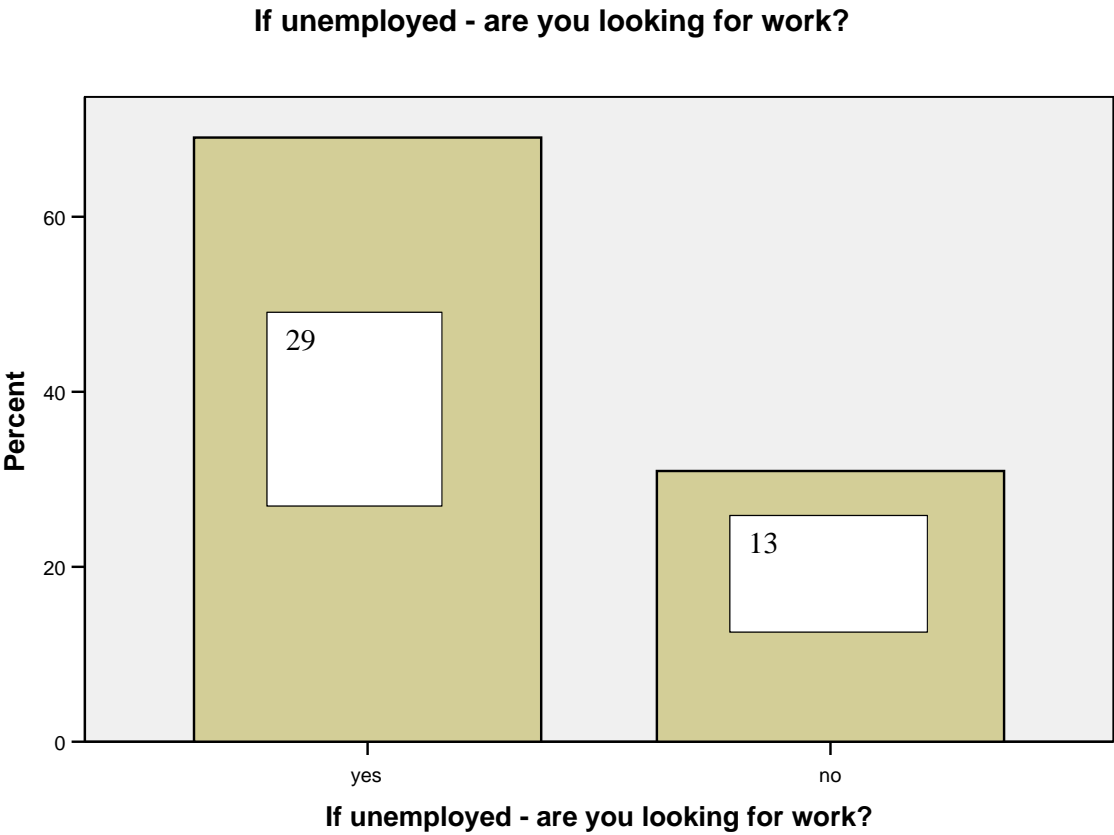
If you have job is it permanent or temporary?



If you have job is it permanent or temporary?

**Chart E4- If unemployed - are you looking for work?**

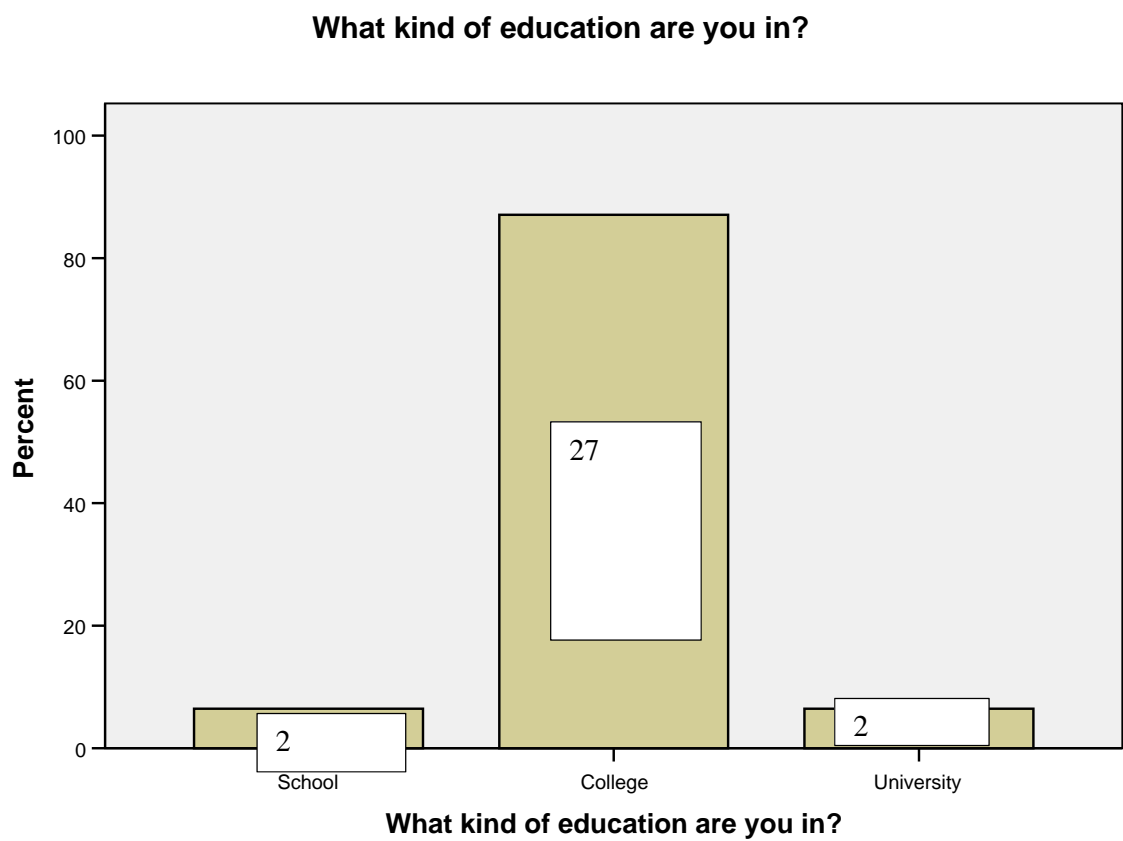
N	Valid	42
	Missing	8



**Chart F- Education theme**

**Chart F1- What kind of education are you in?**

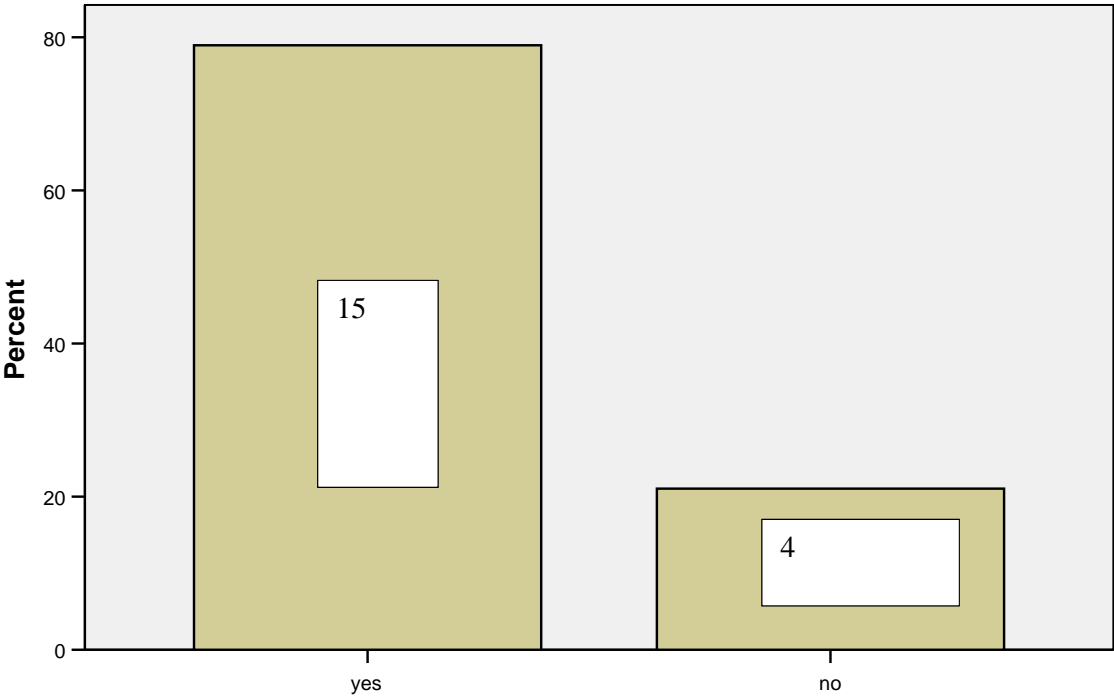
N	Valid	31
	Missing	19



**Chart F2- If not at college or University do you want to go there in the future?**

N	Valid	19
	Missing	31

If not at college or Uni do you want to go there in the future?

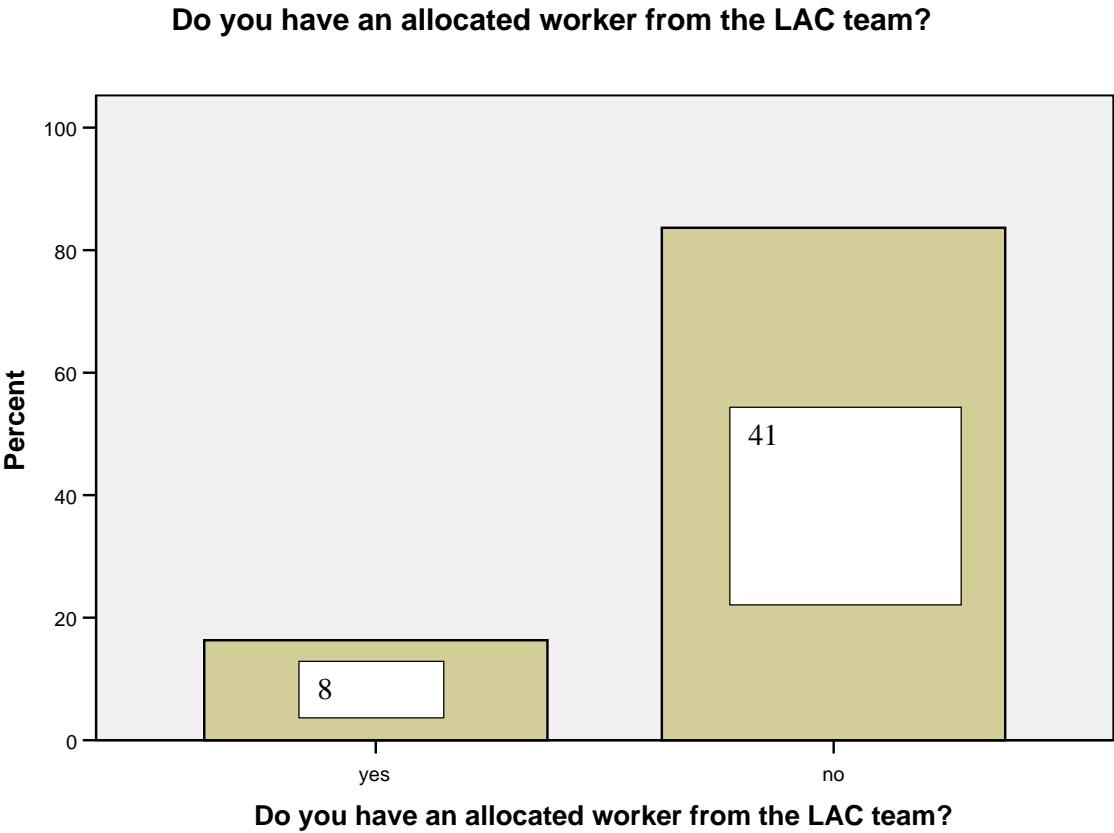


If not at college or Uni do you want to go there in the future?

**Chart G- Allocated social worker theme**

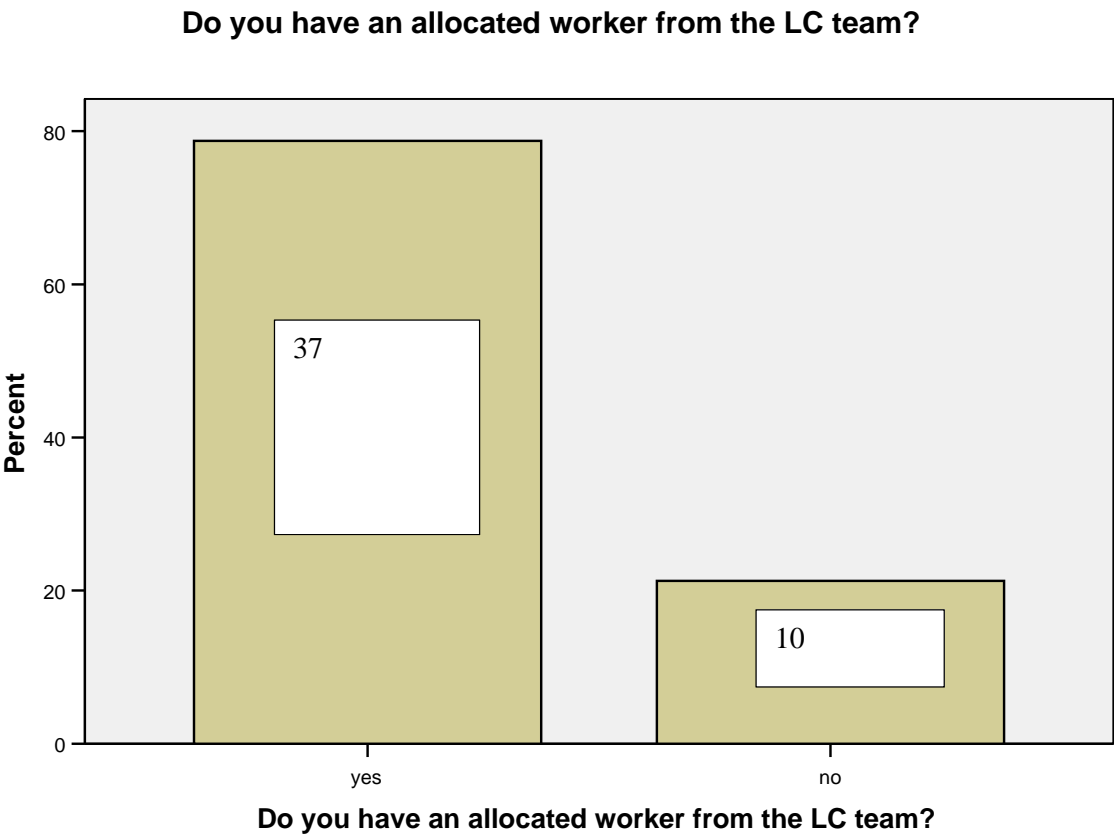
**Chart G1- Do you have an allocated worker from the LAC (Looked After Children) team?**

N	Valid	49
	Missing	1



**Chart G2- Do you have an allocated worker from the LC (leaving care) team?**

N	Valid	47
	Missing	3

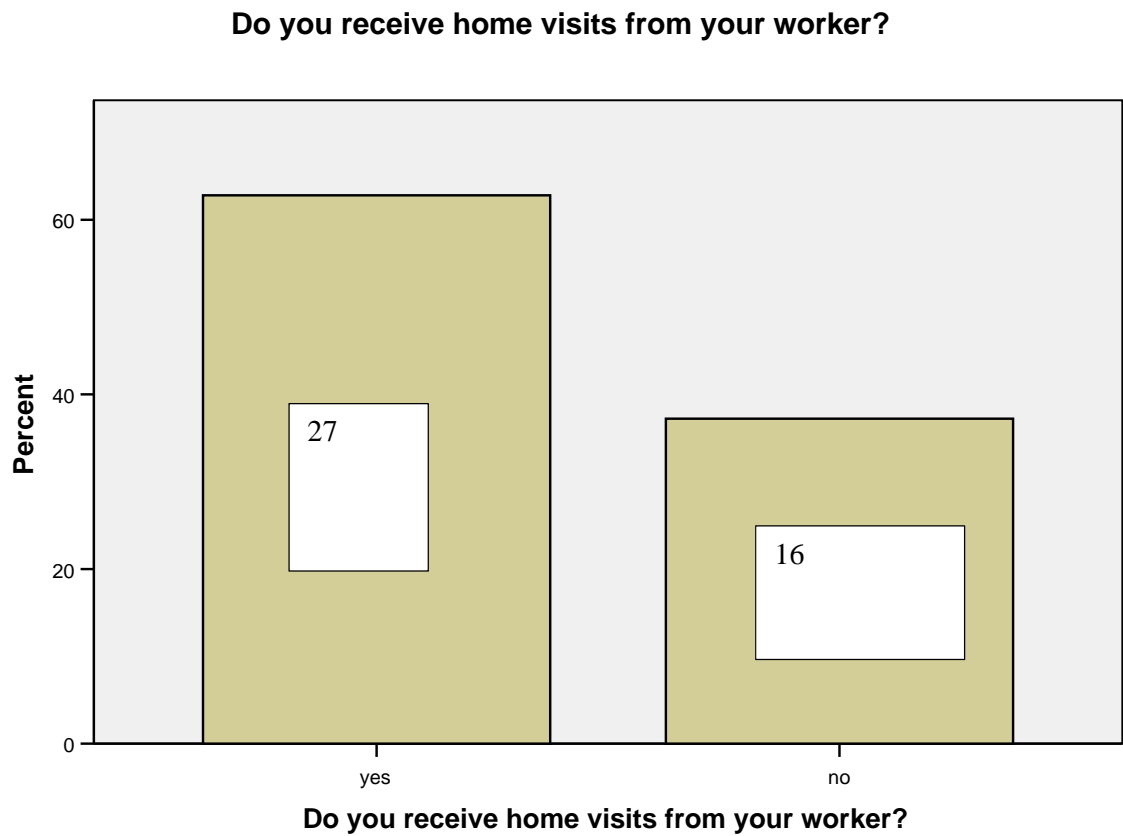


**Chart H-Home visit and helpline theme**



**Chart H1- Do you receive home visits from your worker?**

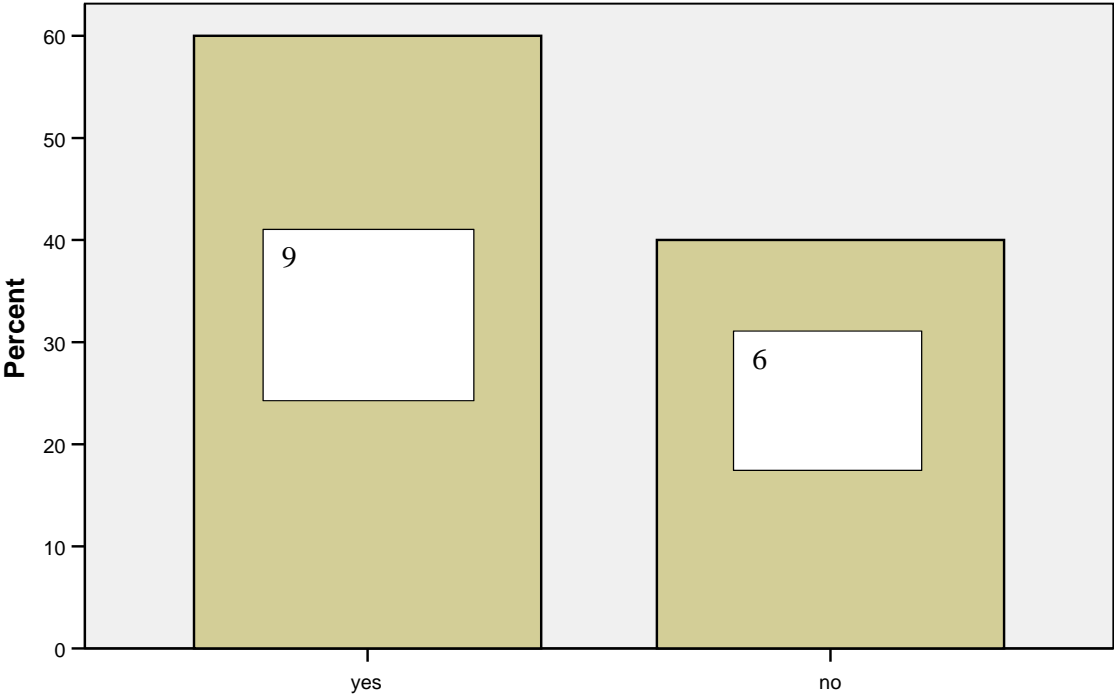
N	Valid	43
	Missing	7



**Chart H2- If you don't receive home visit would you like a worker to visit you at home?**

N	Valid	15
	Missing	35

If you don't receive home visit would you like a worker to visit you at home?

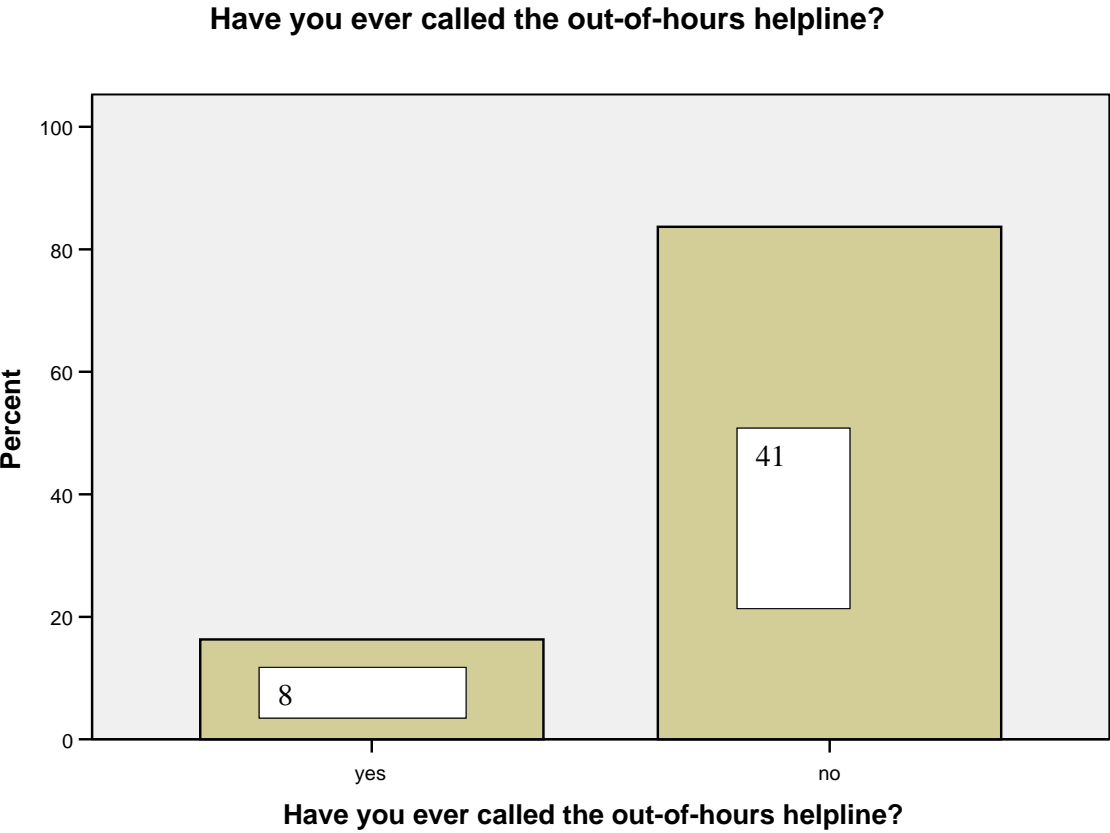


If you don't receive home visit would you like a worker to visit you at home?

Chart H3-Have you ever called the out-of-hours helpline?

Have you ever called the out-of-hours helpline?

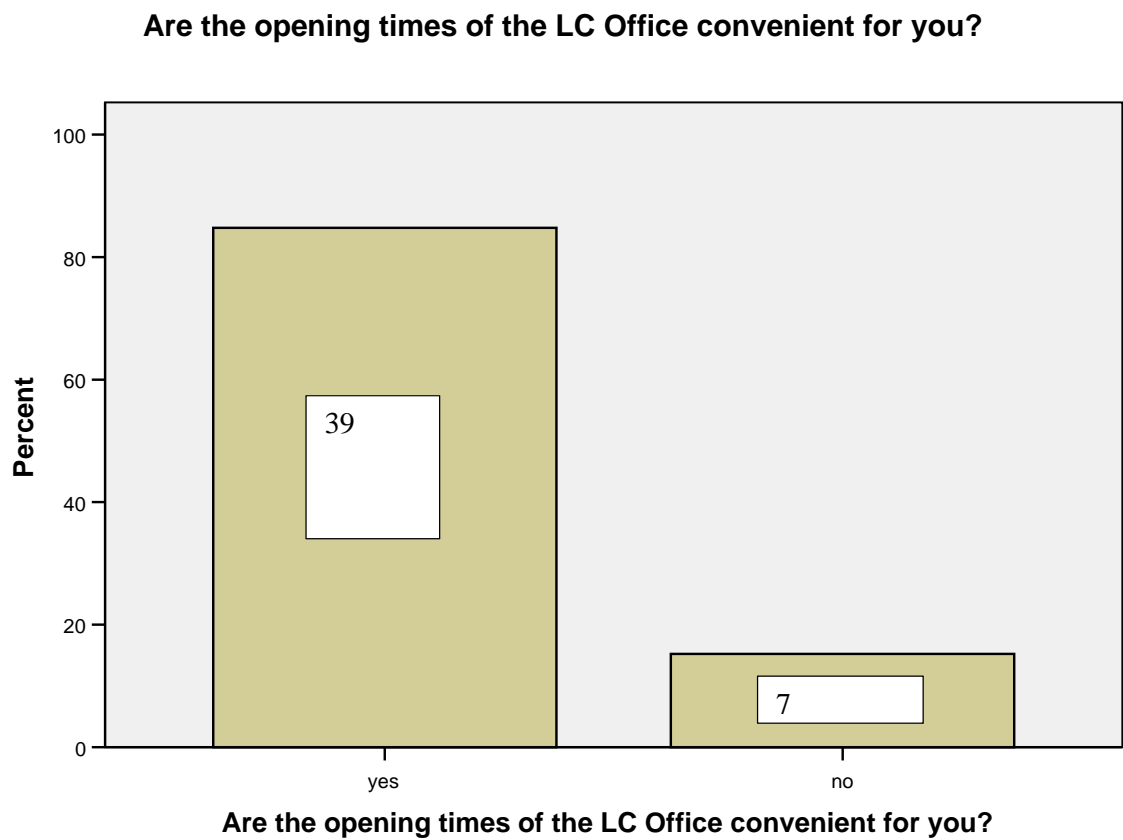
N	Valid	49
	Missing	1



**Chart I –Access to leaving care office and services theme**

**Chart I one- Are the opening times of the office convenient for you?**

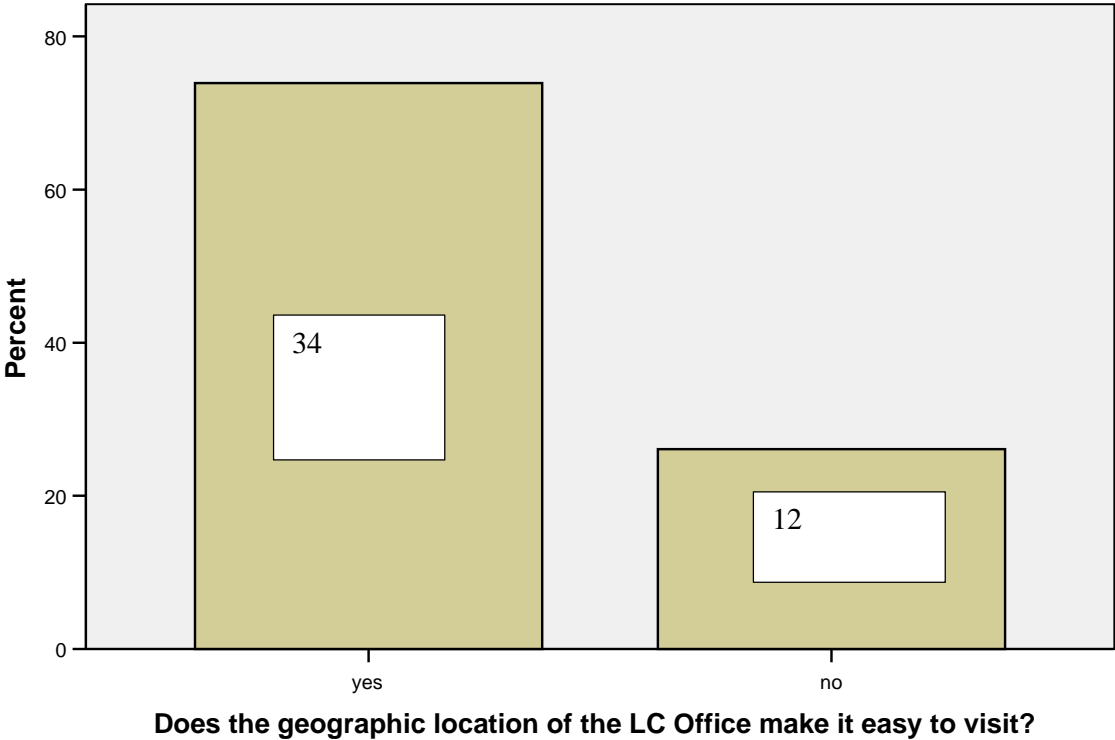
N	Valid	46
	Missing	4



**Chart I- two- Does the geographic location of the Leaving Care Office make it easy to visit?**

N	Valid	46
	Missing	4

**Does the geographic location of the LC Office make it easy to visit?**

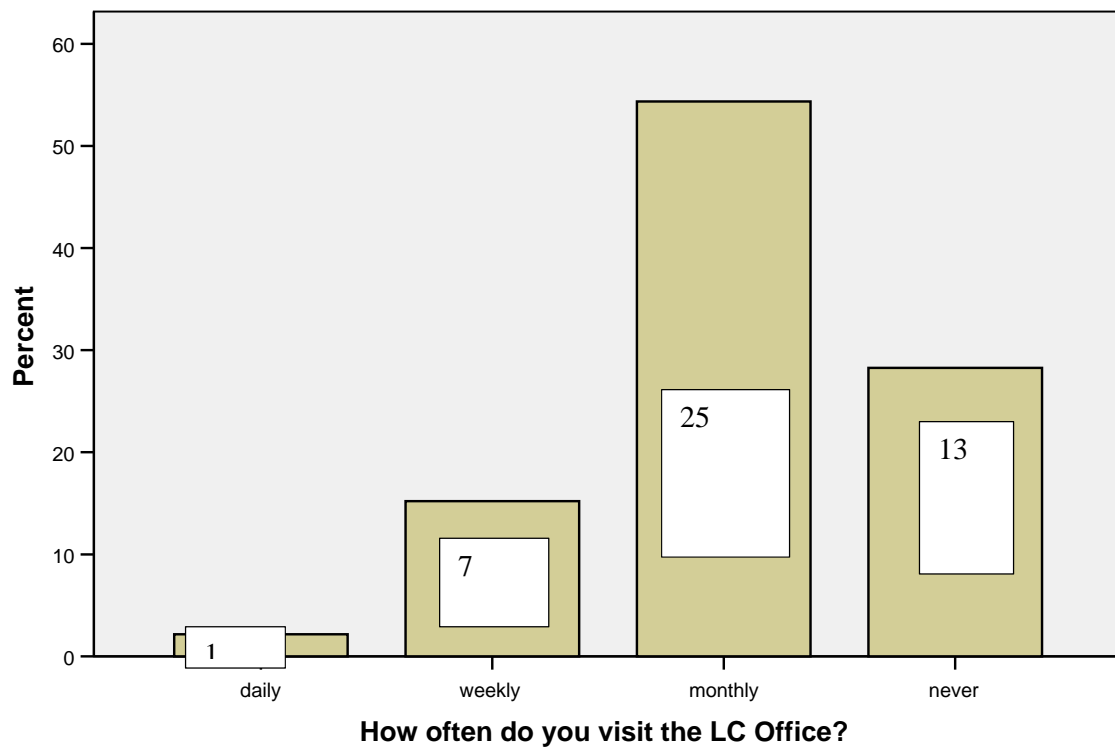


**Chart I -three How often do you visit the LC Office?**

N	Valid	46
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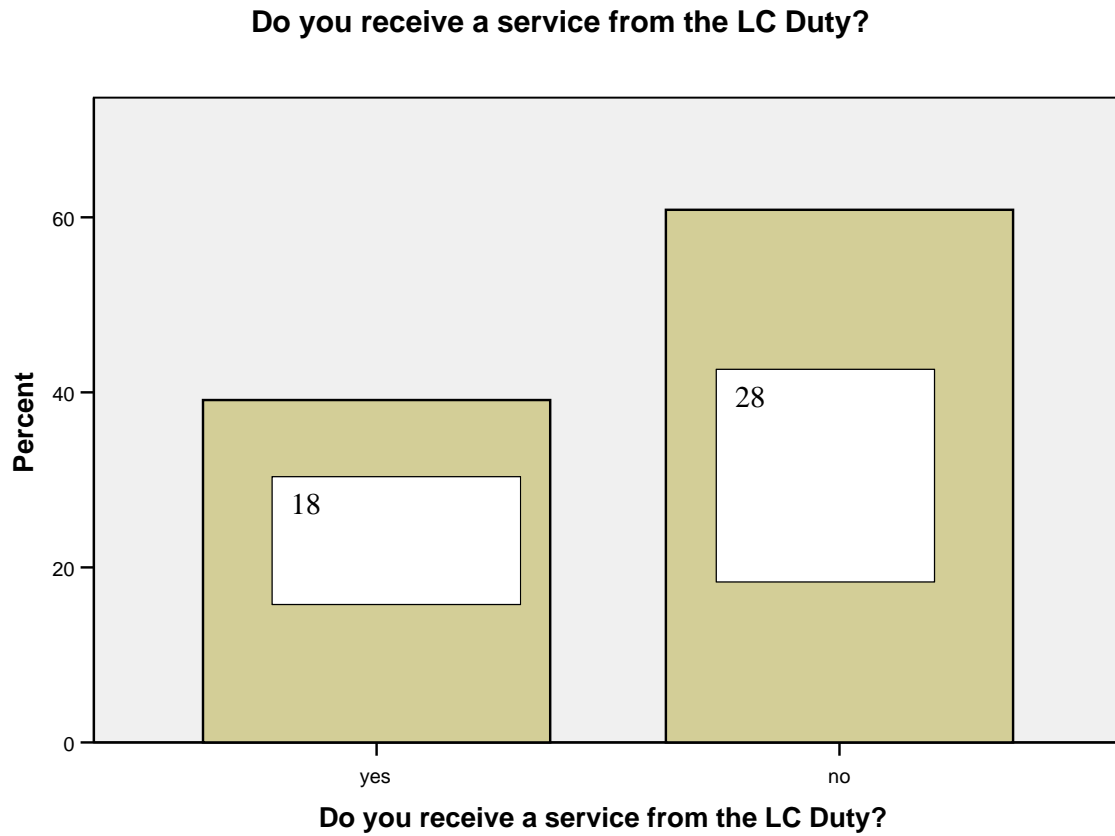
Missing	4
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### How often do you visit the LC Office?



**Chart I four -Do you receive a service from the Leaving Care Duty Team?**

N	Valid	46
	Missing	4

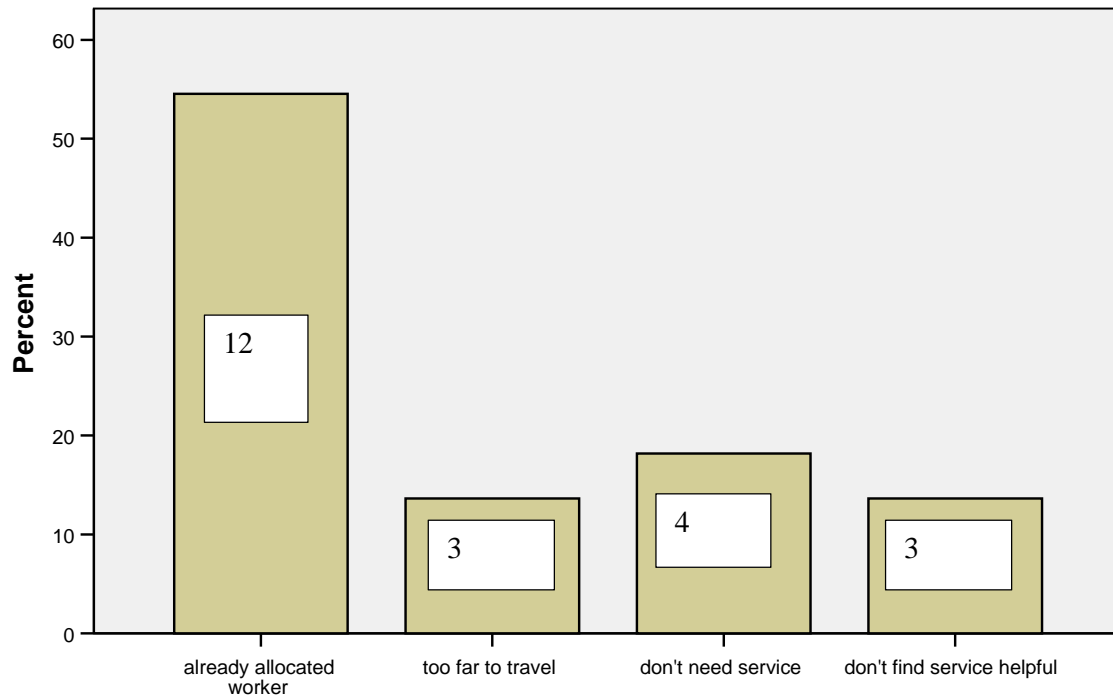


**Chart 1 five- If no service received from the Leaving Care Team - why is this?**

N	Valid	22
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Missing	28
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**If no service received from LC - why is this?**



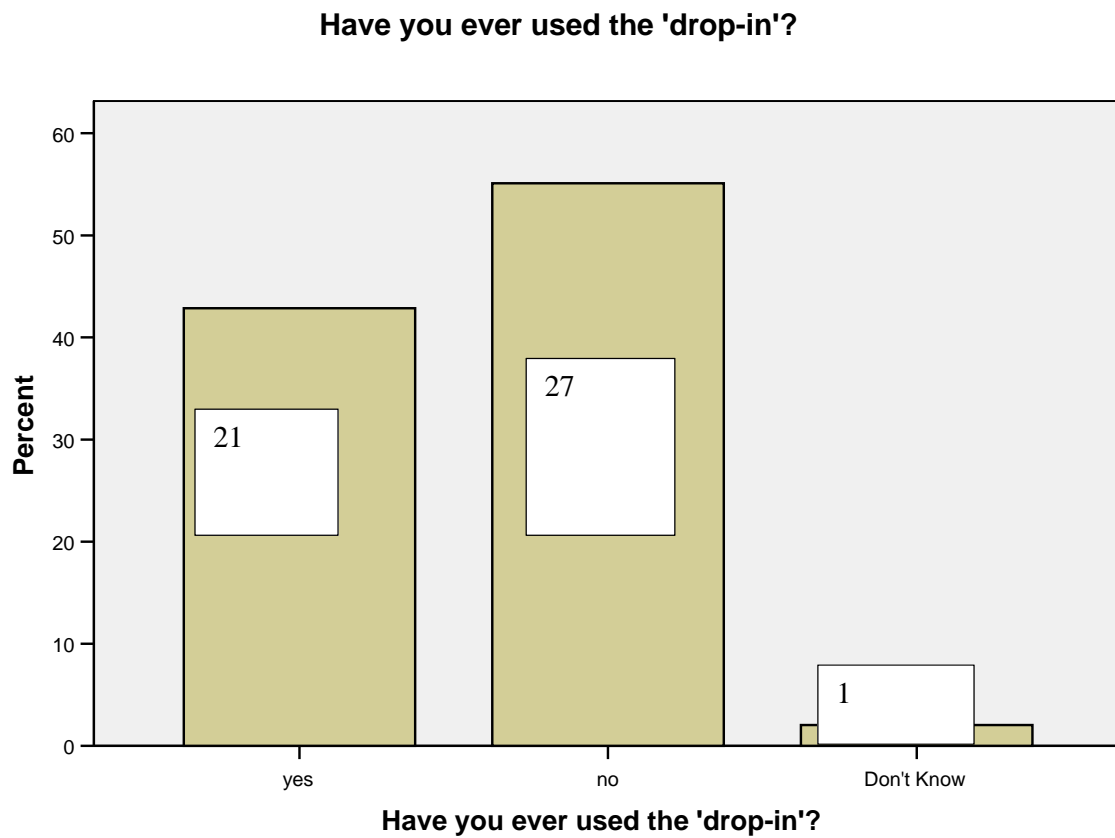
**If no service received from LC - why is this?**

**Chart J- Drop-in theme**

**Chart J 1- Have you ever used the 'drop-in'?**



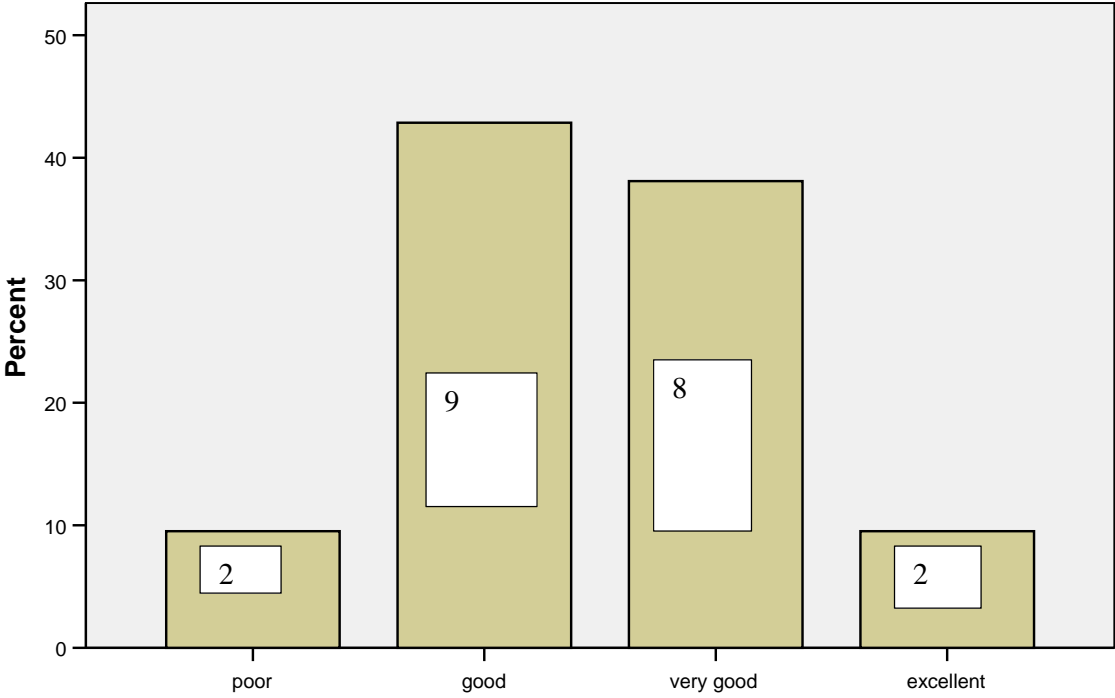
N	Valid	49
	Missing	1



**Chart J2- If you have used the drop in please rate it**

N	Valid	21
	Missing	29

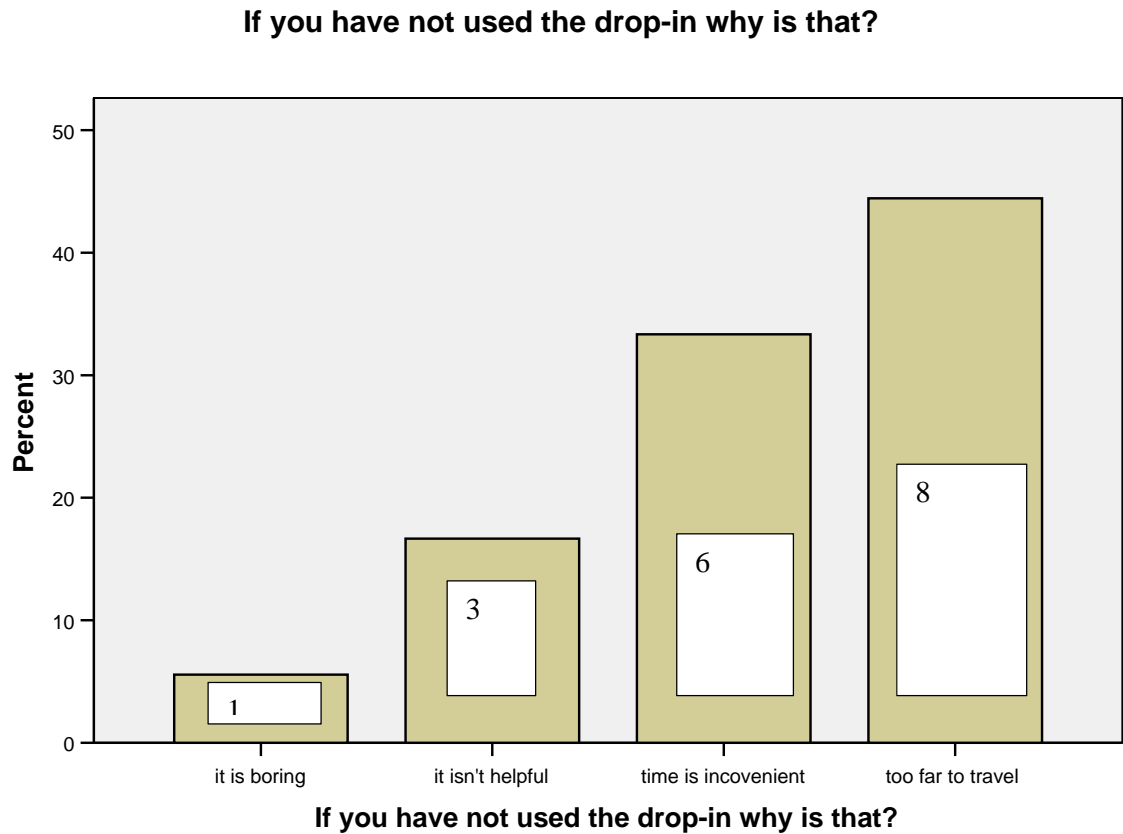
**If you have used the drop in please rate it**



**If you have used the drop in please rate it**

**Chart J3- If you have not used the drop-in why is that?**

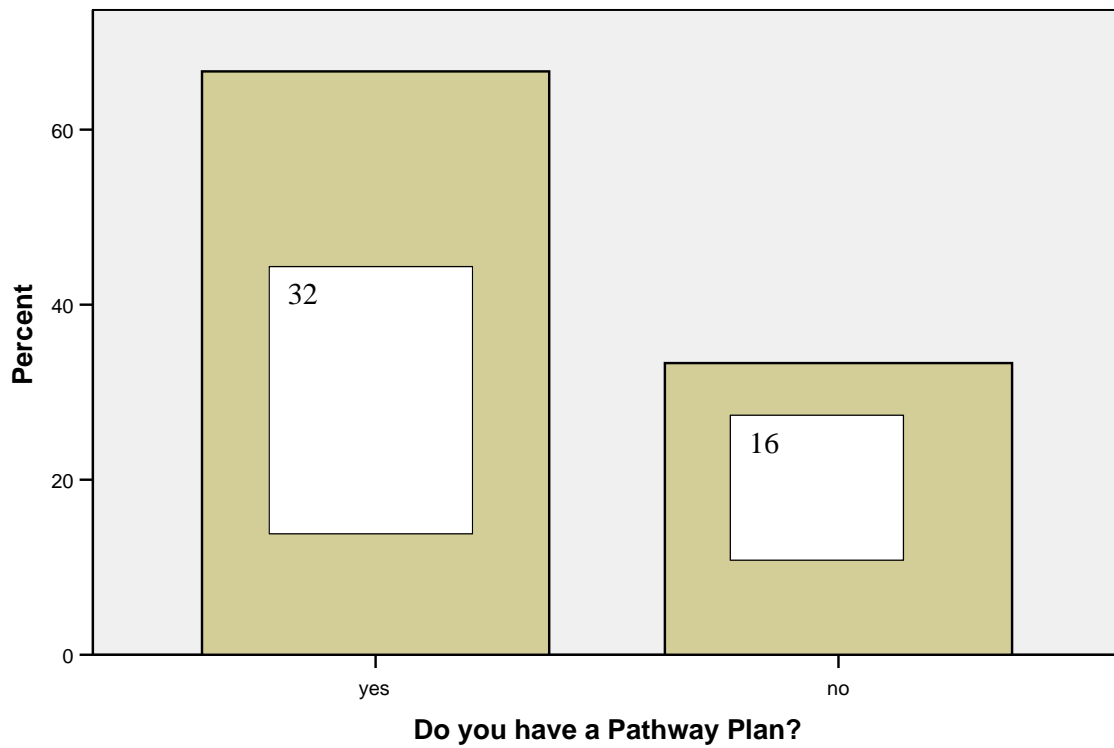
N	Valid	18
	Missing	32



**Chart K- Pathway Plan theme**  
**Chart K1- Do you have a Pathway Plan?**

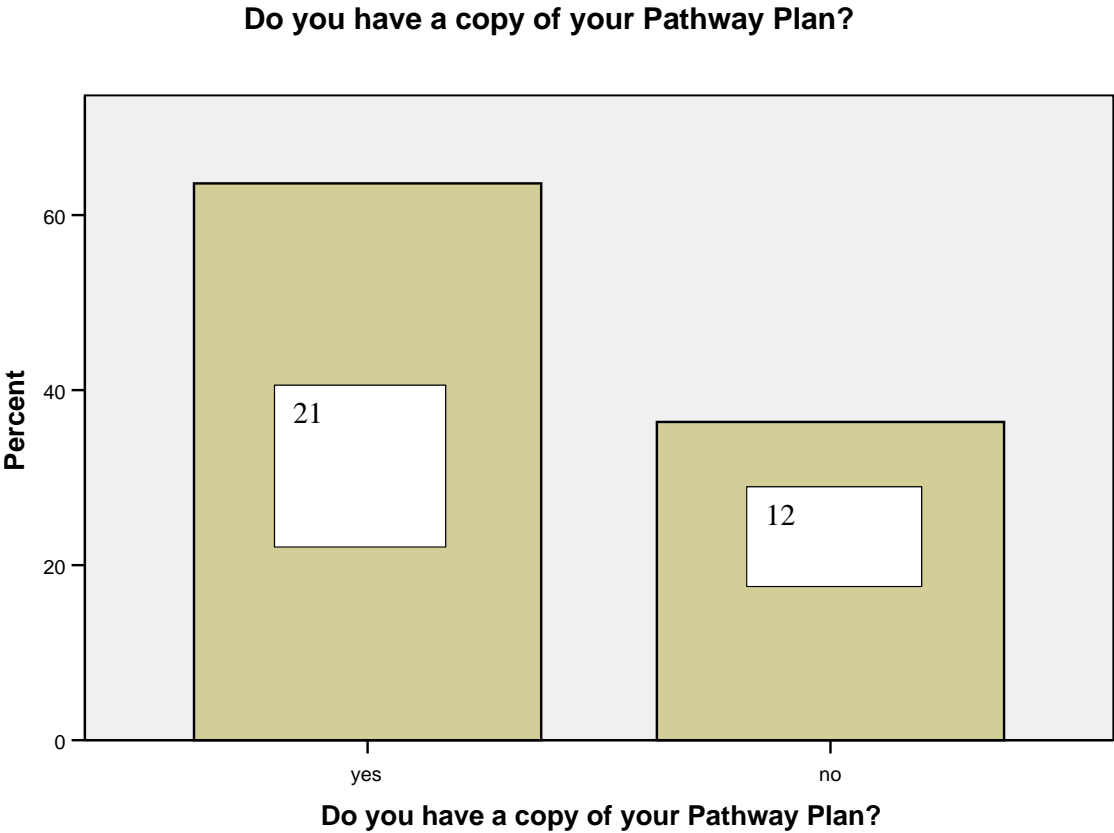
N	Valid	48
	Missing	2

### Do you have a Pathway Plan?



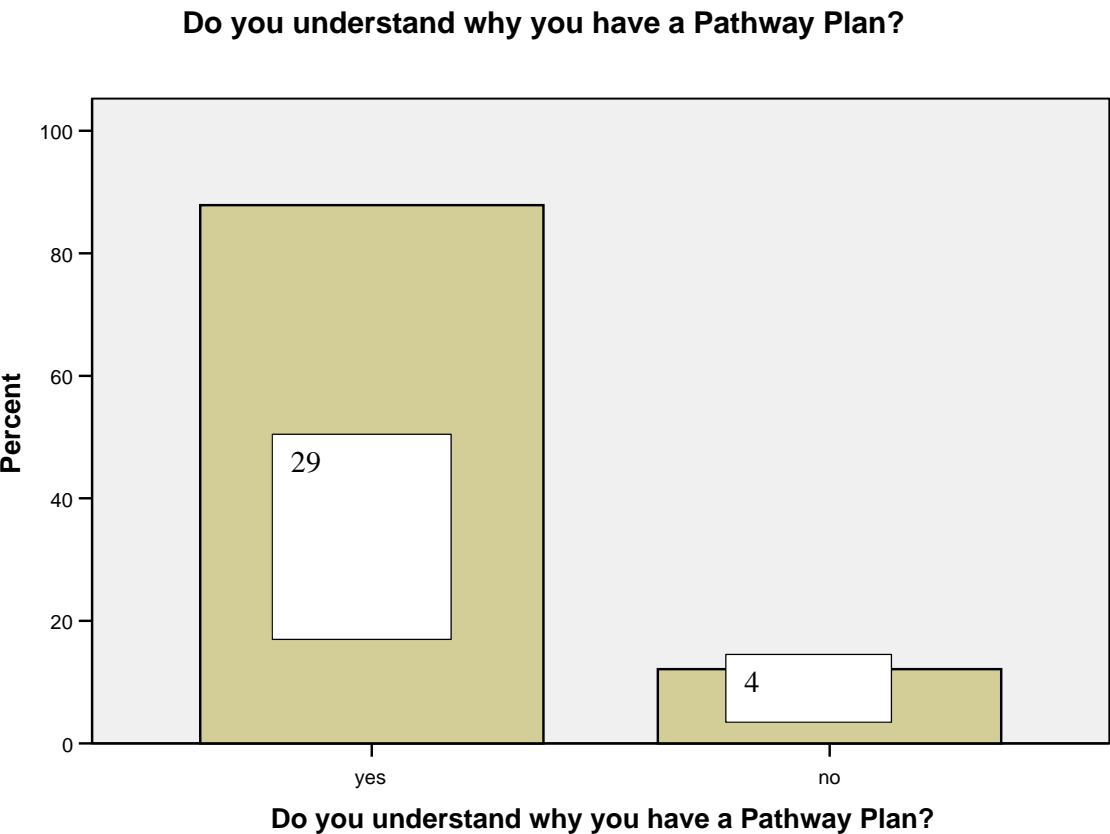
**Chart K2- Do you have a copy of your Pathway Plan?**

N	Valid	33
	Missing	17



**Chart K3- Do you understand why you have a Pathway Plan?**

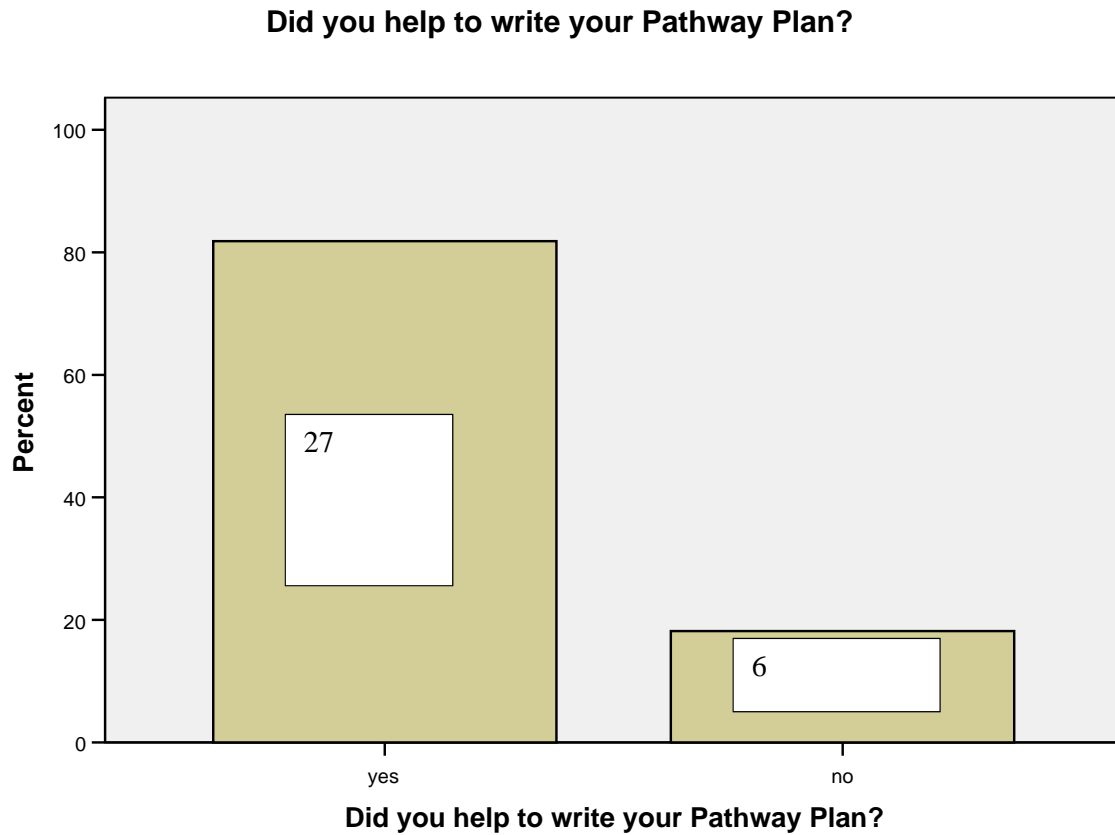
N	Valid	33
	Missing	17



**Chart K4- Did you help to write your Pathway Plan?**

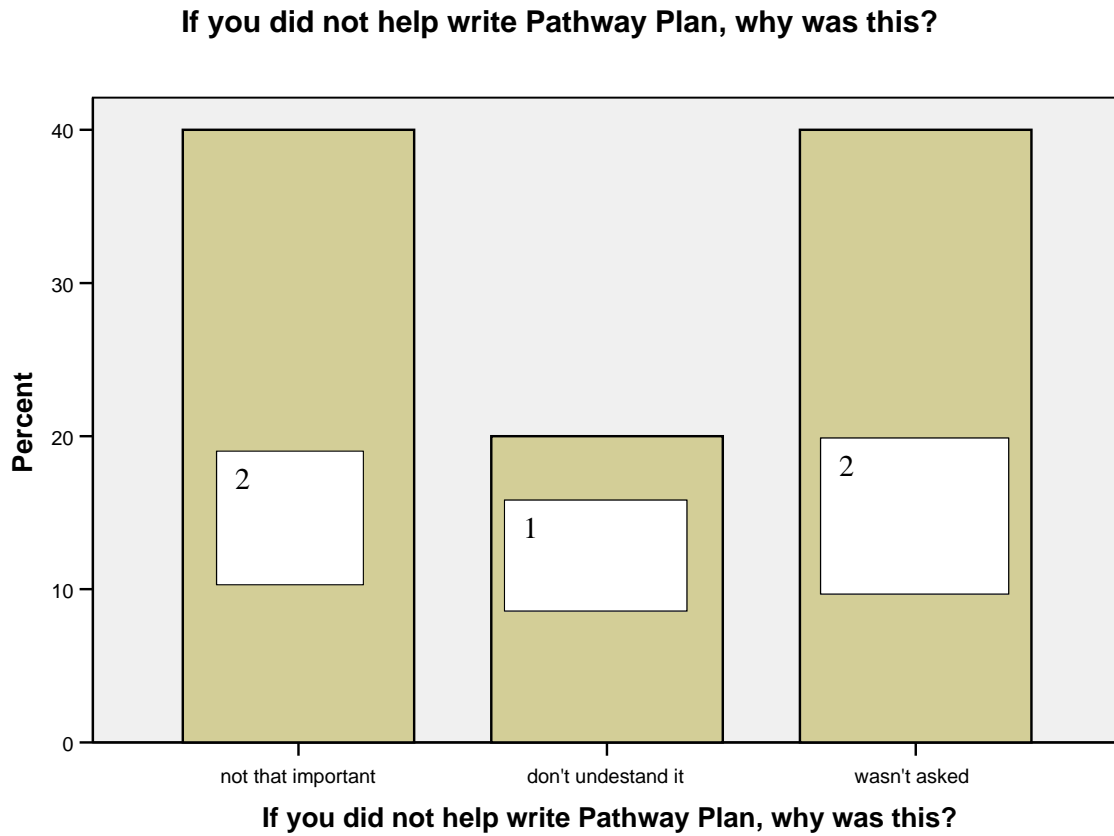
N	Valid	33
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Missing	17
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**Chart K5- If you did not help write Pathway Plan, why was this?**

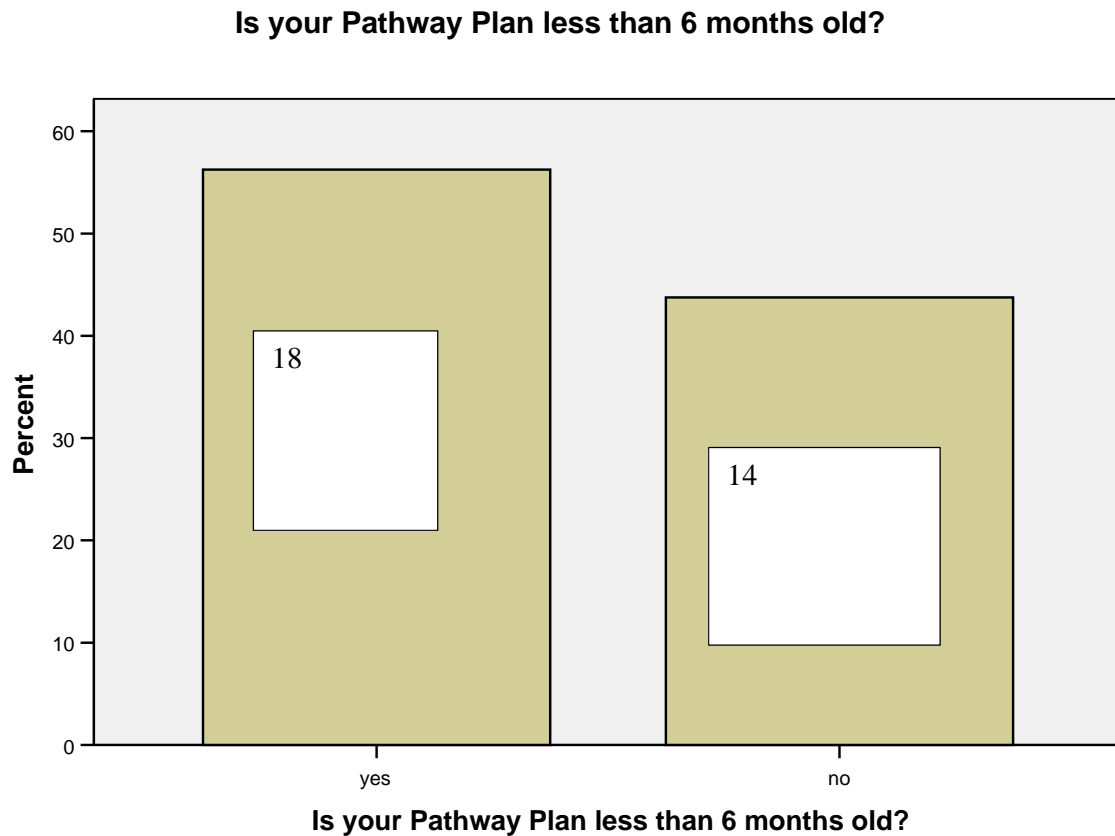
N	Valid	5
	Missing	45



**Chart K6- Is your Pathway Plan less than 6 months old?**

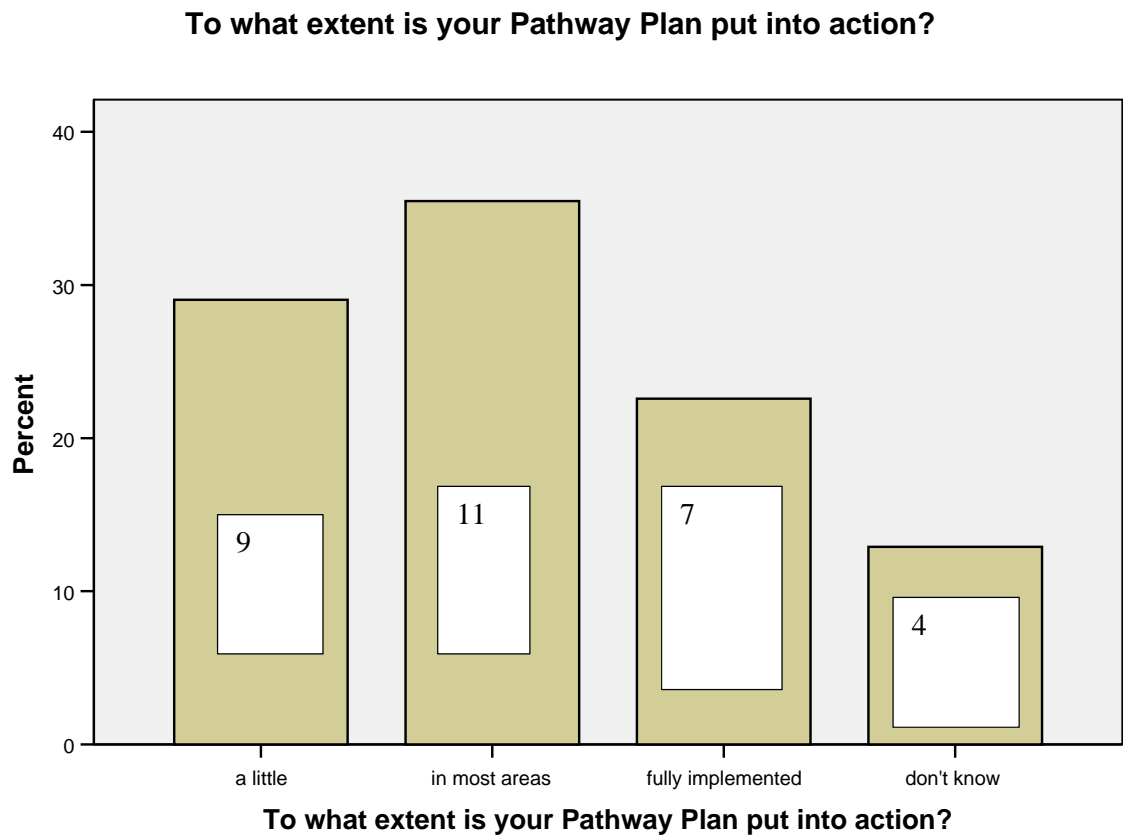


N	Valid	32
	Missing	18



**Chart K7- To what extent is your Pathway Plan put into action?**

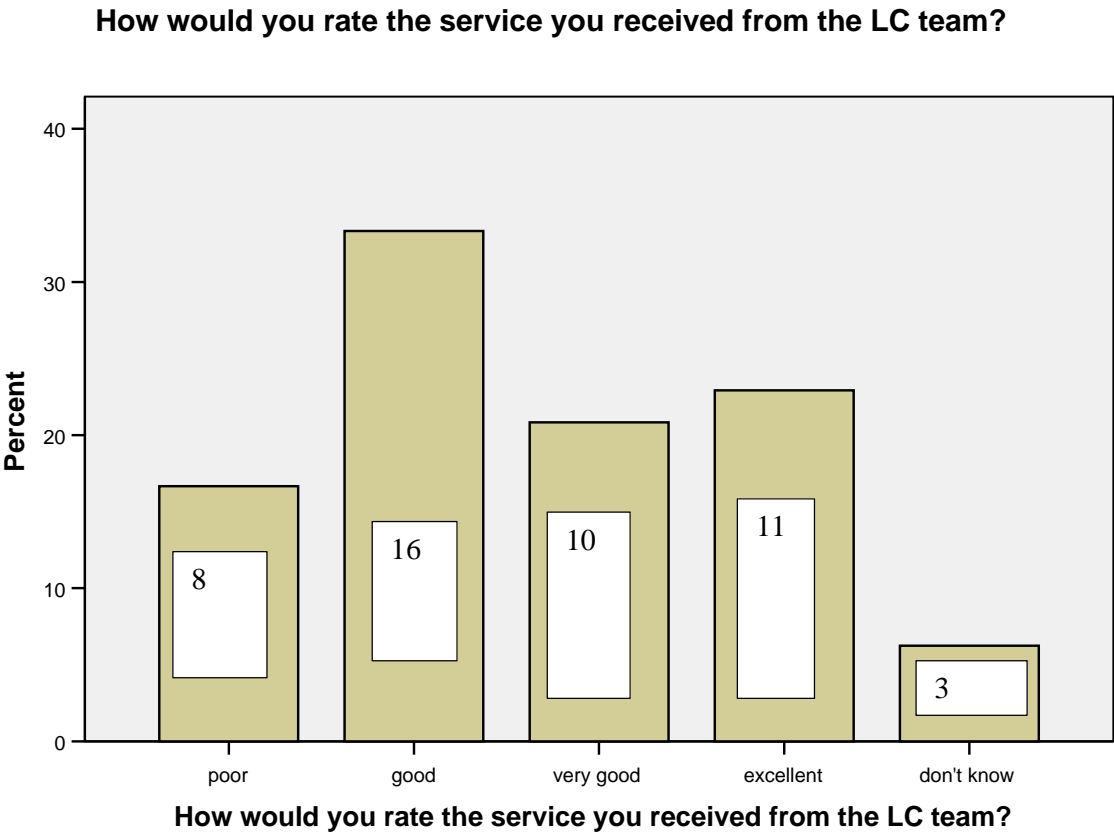
N	Valid	31
	Missing	19



**Chart L-service feedback theme**

**Chart L1- How would you rate the service you received from the Leaving Care team?**

N	Valid	48
	Missing	2



**Chart L2- Do you feel listened to and understood by staff from the Leaving Care team?**

N	Valid	47
	Missing	3

**Do you feel listened to and understood by staff from the LC team?**

